



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

THE
VACILLATIONS
OF
HAZEL
BY
MABEL
BARNES-GRUNDY

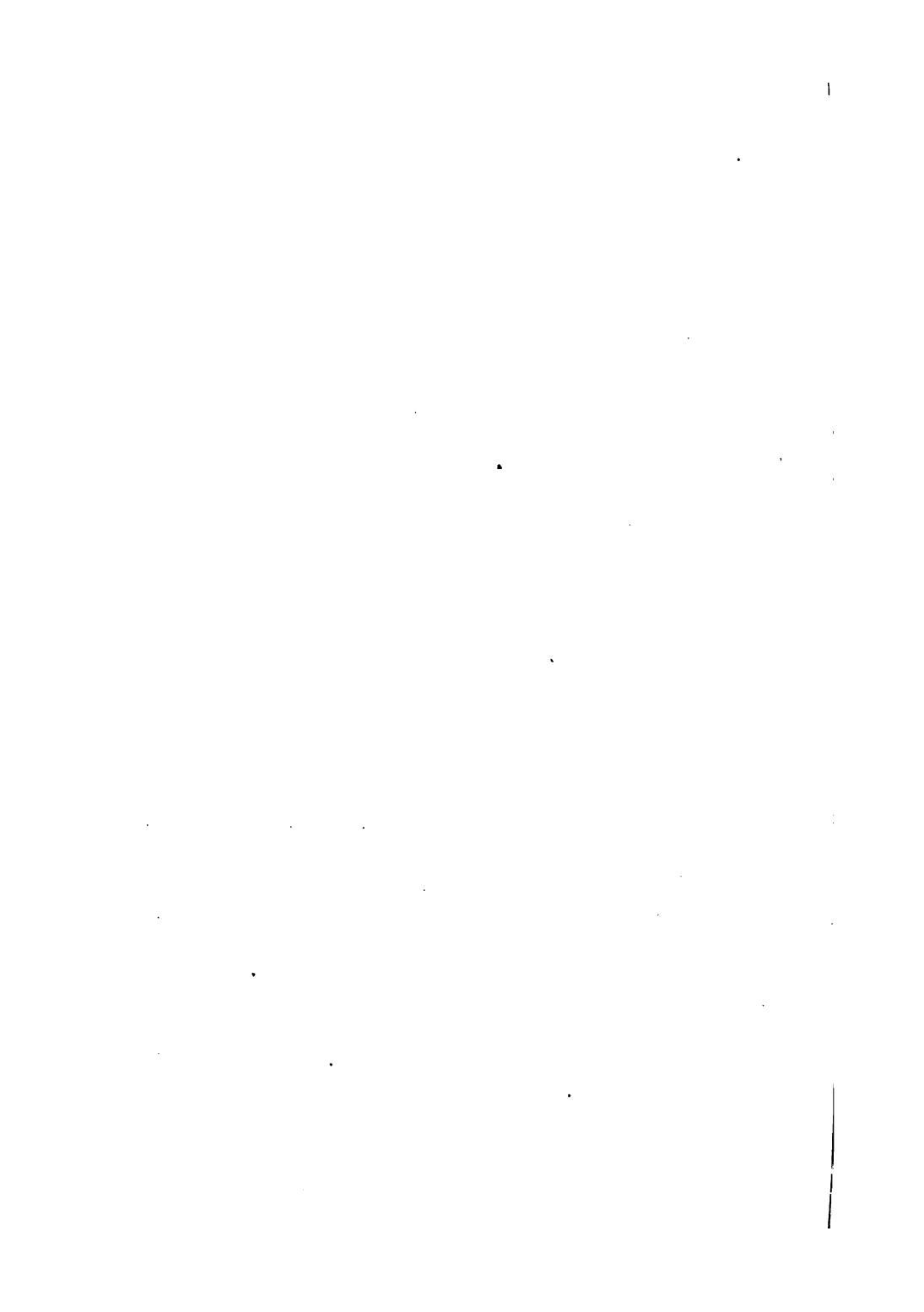
1000 SECOND-HAND, &
ST. PENZANCE.

E. Harris

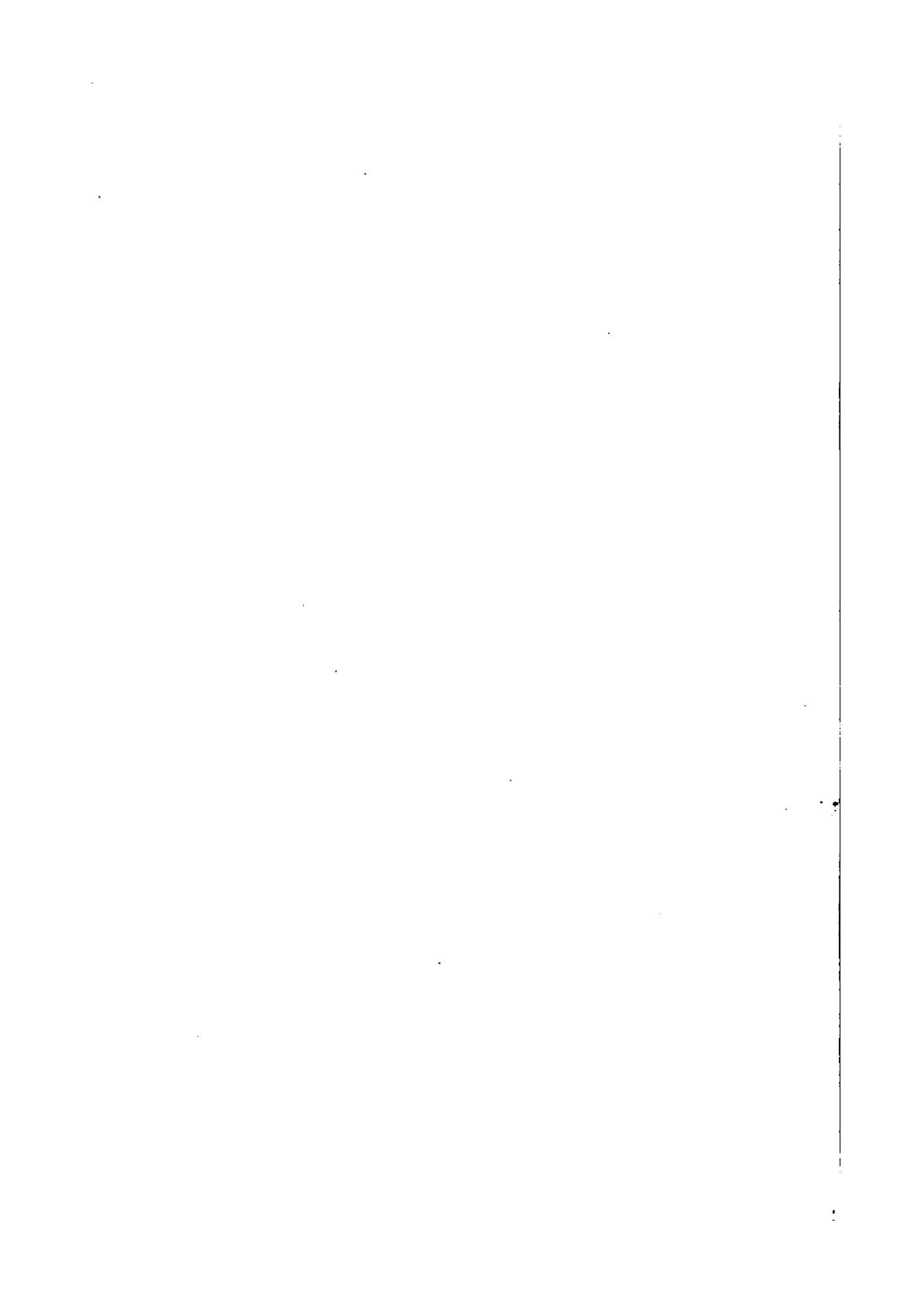
Jan. 06

(71.
2. Bwlitho)





THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.



All rights reserved

The Vacillations of Hazel

BY

MABEL BARNES-GRUNDY

AUTHOR OF "A THAMES CAMP"



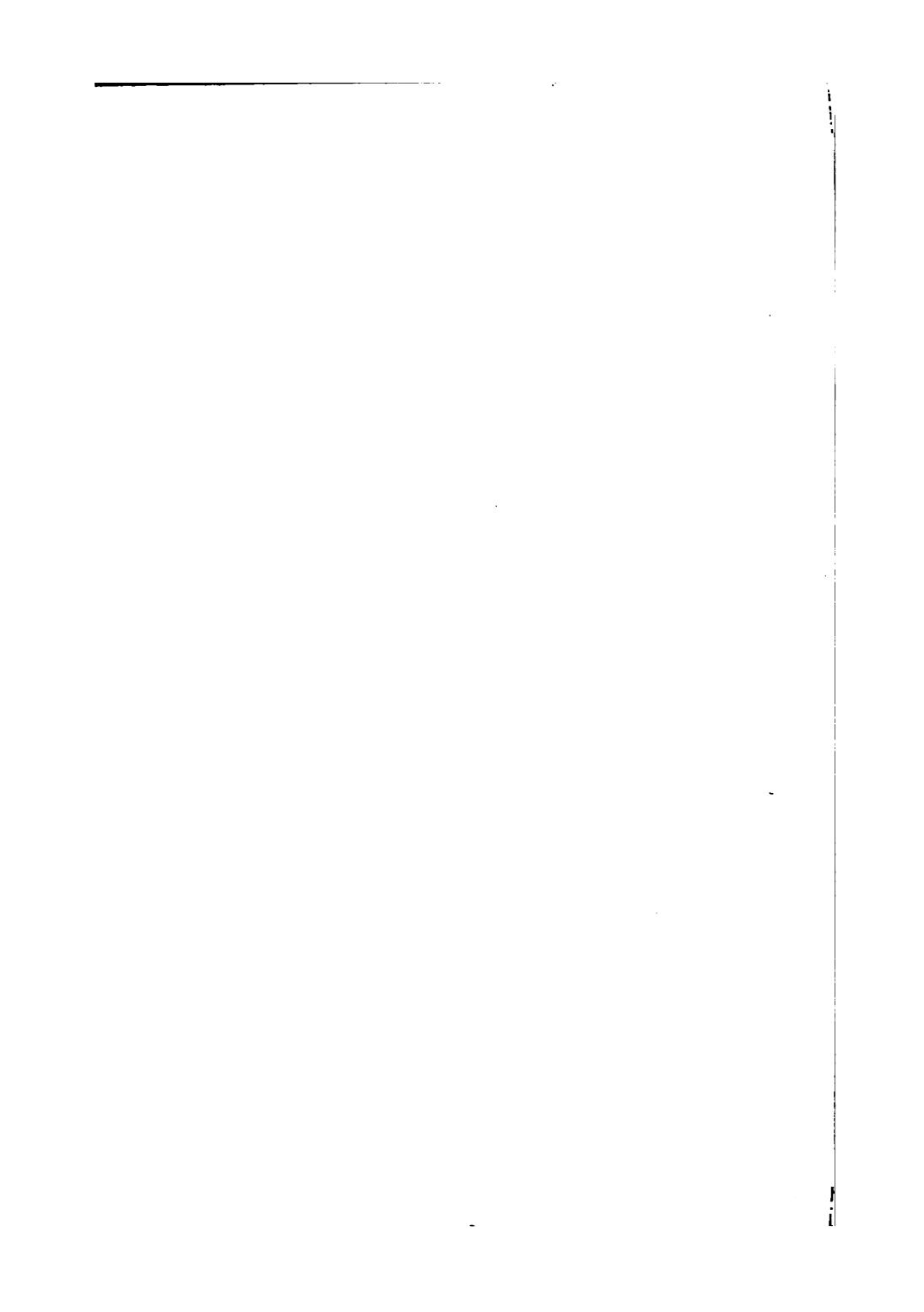
Bristol
J. W. Arrowsmith, 11 Quay Street
London
Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Company Limited

1905



To my Mother

In memory of many happy days spent
in Heatherland.



CONTENTS.

<i>Chap.</i>		<i>Page</i>
I.	SAMMY IMPARTS SOME NEWS	9
II.	ON HOW I BECAME ACQUAINTED WITH MR. INDERWICK	23
III.	SAMMY AND ROSE GOSSIP ON AN UNIM- PORTANT MATTER	31
IV.	I RECEIVE A SNUR FROM MR. INDERWICK, WHICH RENDERS ME ANGRY	40
V.	AN ENCOUNTER WITH MR. INDERWICK . .	57
VI.	I GO ON A VISIT TO AUNT MENELOPHE .	67
VII.	I RECEIVE A LETTER FROM MOTHER AND SOME GOOD ADVICE ON DRESS FROM AUNT MENELOPHE	83
VIII.	A DINNER PARTY, FOLLOWED BY MY SEEING THE GHOST	95
IX.	I RETURN HOME, AND EXCHANGE SENTI- MENTS WITH JERRY ON AUTUMN .	109
X.	AN ALL-HALLOWE'S E'BN. PARTY	120
XI.	WE GO TO TEA WITH MR. INDERWICK, AND I DESCRIBE THE DUSTING OF PARIAN JUGS	135
XII.	ON WASH-DAYS	148
XIII.	MR. INDERWICK ACCOMPANIES ME TO GAYTON TO BUY BUTTER	156
XIV.	I TAMPER SUCCESSFULLY WITH A KEYHOLE AND LUNCH AT PIPER'S WELL	172
XV.	ON THE REPAIRING OF A LOCK AND MY DRIVE WITH MR. INDERWICK . . .	196

<i>Chap.</i>		<i>Page</i>
XVI.	I AM A LITTLE POORLY, AND MR. INDERWICK CALLS	214
XVII.	I UNFORTUNATELY KNOCK OFF A PIECE OF ANGELA'S HAIR, AND SHE IS EXTREMELY ANNOYED	226
XVIII.	MR. INDERWICK ASKS ME TO BE HIS WIFE, AND I SAY "NO"	239
XIX.	I DESIRE TO BE A LOTUS-EATER, AND SAMMY BRINGS ME RUDELY TO EARTH	257
XX.	I START ON A SECOND VISIT TO AUNT MENELOPHE, AND ROBERT INDERWICK SEES ME OFF	267
XXI.	AUNT MENELOPHE HOLDS FORTH ON THE SUBJECT OF MARRIAGE	281
XXII.	I RECEIVE ANOTHER OFFER OF MARRIAGE, AND AM EXCEEDINGLY PERPLEXED .	296
XXIII.	I ENGAGE MYSELF TO EUSTACE ESCOURT, AND AM NOT ALTOGETHER HAPPY .	304
XXIV.	I HAVE SOME LITTLE DIFFERENCES WITH EUSTACE	315
XXV.	A WALK IN THE RAIN, AND EUSTACE TALKS RUSKIN	328
XXVI.	EUSTACE ANNOYS ME, AND I RETIRE TO MY ROOM TO SEW	332
XXVII.	I RECEIVE SOME LETTERS OF CONGRATULATION, AND EUSTACE AGAIN ANNOYS ME	343
XXVIII.	I BREAK OFF MY ENGAGEMENT	360
XXIX.	AUNT MENELOPHE SCOLDS AND AFTERWARDS COMFORTS ME	372
XXX.	I FIND HAPPINESS	379
XXXI.	THE EVE OF MY WEDDING-DAY	387

The Vacillations of Hazel.

CHAPTER I.

SAMMY IMPARTS SOME NEWS.

WHEN I was a little girl of, say, eight years of age Sammy gave me a hedgehog. From that day to this he and I have been close friends. I remember the occasion well. I was huddled up on the floor in our small schoolroom endeavouring to write out the future tense of *parler*, to speak. My eyes smarted with unshed tears, my throat was swollen with suppressed sobs—for outside a summer day reigned supreme, and it was full of sunshine and flowers and the scent of hay—when I heard the familiar sound of Sammy's corduroys beneath the window.

“It's a little 'edge'og, Miss Hazelt, I have brought you. I found it asleep under the 'edge in the croft,'” he handed it in as he spoke, a round, prickly ball, “and I have just seen the mistress and Miss Timmins

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

and Miss Angela go out, and——” his voice dropped to a cautious whisper.

“ Thank you, Sammy, you needn’t help me,” was all I said, as I crept through the window and jumped lightly to the ground.

Sammy tempted me in those days, and I fell ; he tempts me now, and I still fall. This afternoon he brought me some strawberries on a shiny rhubarb leaf ; they were of a large size and beautiful colour.

“ But Miss Angela is making jam to-morrow,” I protested weakly.

“ A few strawberries ‘ere and there won’t make much difference.”

“ No, perhaps not,” I said still more weakly.

I lay back in the wide shade of a sycamore tree and watched him at his mowing. His movements, after the manner of gardeners, were slow and restful. The little pink-tipped daisies and golden buttercups and sweet-scented grass seemed almost to smile as they toppled into the box of the machine ; their removal from the sward had been as gentle as a caress.

Our garden on a June afternoon, when the sun is shining after a soft shower of rain, is the most perfect thing in the world. Its scents are the sweetest—the warm, damp earth, the freshly-cut grass, the wet roses and honeysuckle, and the whiffs of hay and meadow-sweet which creep through the little gaps in the hedge in the rear from the fields in the distance. Its colours are the loveliest. Could any-

SAMMY IMPARTS SOME NEWS.

thing be more perfect than the creamy-white of a butterfly poised above the flaming scarlet of a poppy? or a purple pansy, with its eyes full of tears, turning its velvety face upwards to the sunshine?

I lay and watched the delicate fluttering of the creamy butterfly. I wished that it would leave the poppy, who was a flaunting, boastful sort of fellow, and go and kiss the little velvet pansy and comfort it. Nearer and nearer it fluttered, now pausing to inspect a bed of geraniums, anon hanging above some many-coloured petunias. Now it was getting very close to my wet-eyed little flower. Ah! my wish was gratified; for one second it laid its lips on the lips of the pansy, and then it was gone.

Sammy paused in his mowing, and, fetching a bottle of oil and a feather from the far end of the lawn, began to lubricate the machine.

“Did you speak, Miss Hazelt?” he inquired.

“No, Sammy.”

“Miss Angela and the mistress are out?”

“Yes, Sammy; that is why *you* gathered the strawberries and *I* lie on a deck-chair and do nothing.”

A smile flickered round the corners of his mouth for a second, and then vanished.

“Miss Angela isn’t often out.”

“No, Sammy. Miss Angela belongs to that class of person who always stays in and ‘sees to things.’”

He seated himself on a stump of a tree and settled down for a gossip.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"It is a pity she doesn't go out more."

"A great pity," I agreed.

"The fresh air would do her good. She always looks pale-like."

"Yes; but she is extraordinarily healthy."

"She is *that*. Always up and doin'."

"Always up and doing," I assented with a sigh.

"Is it a mothers' meetin' she be gone to this afternoon?"

"No, to the consecration of Neston Church. She and mother have driven over with Mr. and Mrs. Oates. At the moment they will probably be singing 'The Church's One Foundation.'"

"Fancy, on a thirsty afternoon like this!" ejaculated Sammy, as he drew his hand across his mouth.

"Are you thirsty, Sammy?" I inquired.

"Not desperate, Miss Hazelt; I've know'd myself worse."

"Is your inward eye, so to speak, directed towards the foundations of our house—to a cool corner, to a corner where a barrel reposes?"

"Well, now you mention it, Miss Hazelt, p'raps it is, though I shouldn't have thought of it unless my attention had been called to it."

I rose laughing.

"Is it raspberry vinegar or beer you are taking?"

"Beer on mowing days, Miss Hazelt."

I walked across the lawn to the house. On my return journey through the hall I met Rose, our housemaid.

SAMMY IMPARTS SOME NEWS.

"Sammy has had his beer to-day, Miss Hazel," she volunteered.

"Indeed!"

"Yes. The missis never gives him more than one glass."

"Rose," I remarked gently, "when I require information upon any subject I will ask for it. Kindly open the front door for me."

It has always been somewhat difficult to keep Rose in her right place.

With care I carried the foaming glass across the lawn: Angela would have said it was lowering myself to carry drink to a gardener, and extremely common. It was not common; it was unusual, my opportunities for so doing being rare, owing, as I remarked before, to Angela's always being at home and "seeing to things."

"You should be very grateful to me, Sammy; it is hot in the sun," I observed as I fell back in the chair.

"I'm more'n grateful, Miss Hazelt," he replied. And he looked it; and I was interested in wondering how much longer he could have held his breath, for the glass was of a fair size.

He returned to his mowing and I to my day-dreaming. With half-closed eyes I gazed at the patches of pastel-blue sky peeping through the delicate tracery of the sycamore leaves; at the white chiffon clouds; at the clean, bright, rain-washed green of the oaks; at the hundreds of little flies and midges glancing about in the sun-

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

shine ; at the brown plush bees as they lazily crawled in and out of the Canterbury bells and fox-gloves. Again I reflected what a good thing was a garden on an afternoon in June. Angela had said, as she passed me in her neat fawn alpaca dress, that perhaps I had forgotten that the week's mending had not yet been touched. I expressed great surprise. It is so easy to be surprised, and it looked as though I meant to rush off straightway for my work-basket and the stockings.

I lay and wondered what Angela would do if I were to die. There would be such a blank in her life. For twenty-one out of her thirty years she had devoted herself to reminding me of things like stockings to darn and drawing-rooms to dust. She would be very dull without me. And Heatherland was not a lively place ; no, Heatherland-on-the-Dee might be the prettiest village in the Hundred of Wirral, its air might be the purest, its view of the blue Welsh hills might be the loveliest, but it was by no means lively. Mother and Angela would miss me very much.

Sammy broke in upon my reflections.

“Not much doin’ in Heatherland just now, Miss Hazel.”

I sat up quickly. Many years of experience have taught me that when Sammy in a casual sort of way says, “Not much doin’ in Heatherland,” he has news to impart of the utmost importance.

As quickly I lay back again. Many years of

SAMMY IMPARTS SOME NEWS.

experience have also taught me that to extract that news one must proceed carefully and diplomatically. Sammy must be baited and played with exquisite skill, and this was a pleasant, lazy afternoon on which to angle. I smiled to myself as my fish went down on his somewhat rheumaticy knees and began to weed a geranium bed.

“No, Sammy,” I replied carelessly, “there never is much doing in Heatherland; it is a place singularly devoid of interest.”

“That be so, and yet now and again bits of news crop up like.”

“Yes,” I said, closing my eyes, “but we are not in a position to hear it. We lead such quiet lives; and you, of course, not having a wife, are not likely to hear anything of real interest. Now Jonah at the rectory, and Jonah’s wife who cleans the church, will know everything——”

A snort interrupted me. It came from the neighbourhood of the geranium bed.

“Did you speak, Sammy?”

“Jonah! Jonah Windybag!”

“I did not know that was his surname,” I remarked politely.

Another snort.

“Jonah Claptrap! Jonah Gaspipes!”

“Dear me, what extraordinary names!” I ventured again.

Sammy bent back on his haunches and spat on his hands.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"And the wife of Jonah Windybag, Mrs. Windybag!"

"Well, what of her? She seems a decent sort of woman." I murmured.

Sammy indulged in derisive laughter for some seconds.

"That woman will go to hell!" he said at length.

This announcement was of so startling a character, that in the stress of the moment I omitted to mention to Sammy the impropriety of his language.

"Yes," he repeated, "she may clean churches and polish up the brass on the font, but she'll go to hell all the same."

"What a dreadful prospect for her! Are you sure you are correct in your supposition, Sammy?"

"Quite sartin sure. No woman can tell lies like her and keep out of hell-fire."

"But what has she been telling lies about?" I asked with curiosity.

"Everythink. It's enough to make a hangel's wings stop curling to 'ear her. Now, for instance, Miss Hazelt, she acsually told Widow Price as 'ow I wanted to marry her before she made the acquaintance of Jonah."

"Well, perhaps you did," I suggested; "only it's so long ago you have forgotten."

When I met Sammy's eye I felt sorry I had spoken.

"Then she 'as told everybody in Heatherland," he went on, ignoring my interruption, "that Jonah was

SAMMY IMPARTS SOME NEWS.

first with his peas and potaters this year. Jonah first!" (He was fairly spluttering now.) "Jonah before me with peas and taters! Why, Jonah can no more grow peas than I can grow coffee berries. Just as ours is gettin' so old that they are about ready to turn into split peas Jonah 'as his first lot ready, somewhere about Michaelmas."

"It seems to me that Jonah requires our sympathy and pity," I said softly.

"And now, to beat all, she is goin' round and tellin' the whole village a private bit o' news I tells to Jonah in strict confidence the other night. A most himportant bit o' news."

"May I ask where you imparted this piece of news?"

"Why, at the 'Black Horse.' I just stepped in casual like. I wanted to see Jonah about some geranium cuttins', and he stood me a glass; and, not to be behindhand in friendliness, I up and told 'un what I'd heard. There was just the two of us in a corner; not another blessed soul could 'ear."

"But don't you think a public-house an unsuitable spot to select for the imparting of information of a momentous character? Jonah would—would probably become expansive; you should have thought of that. Jonah's wife, on his return home, would possibly make unnecessary and somewhat pointed remarks about this expansiveness, and to soothe her Jonah would whisper into her ear your secret. But I don't suppose it really matters, Sammy," I con-

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

tinued. "Nothing of any real importance happens in Heatherland. I'll be bound that your secret is of no more weighty a character than the fact that Mrs. Oates's tea and coffee service, which has done duty for twenty years, has just been resilvered, or that Mr. Frederick Moss is engaged to be married, making the fifth time."

I again closed my eyes, and dismissed the subject as though finished with. I knew that Sammy's secret would be mine within the next five minutes. I had only to lie with folded hands and await events. One has but to assume that Sammy's news is absolutely worthless, when he will take every step to prove it the contrary.

He flung it at my head suddenly.

"Mr. Inderwick be comin' to live at the Old Hall Farm."

Now I am bound to confess that I was startled; so much so that Dibbs, my wall-eyed fox-terrier, who was curled up on my knee, fell off, and walked away in high dudgeon.

I recovered myself quickly. It would never do to let Sammy know that he had become, so to speak, master of the situation. His superiority would be insufferable; besides, I wanted to know more. I must walk warily.

"Indeed!" I began in my coolest manner, but Sammy interrupted me. There was triumph in his voice.

"I knew you'd be surprised, Miss Hazelt. Why,

SAMMY IMPARTS SOME NEWS.

you 've gone quite flushed-like, and poor Dibbs gone away with 'is tail between 'is legs. You jumped so I thought as how you must be took sudden bad. Never saw anyone so startled-like, and all about a bit o' news that is quite valueless, and as likely as not may not 'ave a word of truth in it."

He picked up a rake, and made a movement as though to go away.

"Don't go, Sammy," I said quite humbly. "Your news is almost—epoch-making. I admit I—am—vastly interested. Sit down and tell me all about it. Who told you, and when is he coming?"

There are occasions when one must humble oneself even to one's servitors.

Sammy resumed his seat on the tree stump. There was a look of supreme happiness on his wrinkled, weathered old face, and he rolled his sentences round as though they were toothsome delicacies.

"It was 'is 'ousekeeper who told me. I was passin' the farm, and she was shooin' some hens to bed, and—"

"Isn't he married then?" I broke in.

Sammy regarded me severely.

"I can't do with hinterruptions, Miss Hazelt, when I'm tellin' a story."

I expressed my sorrow, and he continued—

"She was shooin' some hens to bed, and one, like the silly things they is, got through a hole in the 'edge, and comes schreechin' down the lane, with the 'ousekeeper—whose name is Mrs. Egerton—after it.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

She nearly ran into my hopen arms, and the two of us were nigh on ten minutes of the clock persuin' that darned fowl of the air before we persuaded it to go 'ome. Then most civil-like she asks me in for some refreshment, which I thought would be unfriendly to refuse, and I follers 'er into the kitchen, wonderin' what on earth she could be doin' there, as the 'ouse, as you know, has stood hempty since auld Crabby died. And the whole place looked as though a Cheap Jack was goin' to be held in it. Pots and pans, and pianers and pictures, and dolly-tubs and books, all muddled up in most hawful confusion ; and when she sees me lookin' at it all, she says, 'You may well look.' 'Is it a jumble sale?' I asks. An' she says, 'No. It's Mr. Inderwick who is comin' to live 'ere. And I'm sortin' out some of his old uncle's rubbish. He must have been a rare old miser. Never saw such a collection in my life. Not a good pan or crock in the place. And the master comin' in a fortnight's time, and me got to get the whole place cleaned down and the new furniture in ; it's more than one mortal pair of 'ands can do. And when I writes to 'im about it, he just writes back and tells me not to worry, but to be sure and put 'is split cane fishin'-rod in a safe place and out of the dust. That's all he cares for, 'is fishin'-rods and books, and not a decent coat to his back.'"

"Did she say that?" I asked with uncontrolled interest.

SAMMY IMPARTS SOME NEWS.

“She did so, Miss Hazelt. Those were 'er very words, 'Not a decent coat to his back.'”

“Perhaps he's very poor,” I suggested.

But Sammy waved this on one side.

“Crabby left him every sixpence of 'is money.”

“No!” I said.

“Yes,” said he; “and the farm and all the land and stock, and he's goin' to start farmin'.”

“But he wasn't a farmer,” I objected. “I remember he was going to be a—a something in a profession—a barrister or a doctor.”

“Can't help that,” said Sammy doggedly. “He's goin' to start farmin' now. His own 'ousekeeper says so, and she ought to know.”

“Oh, of course!” I agreed. “Go on, Sammy; and—and he's not married, and he must be getting quite old.”

“He may be married,” said Sammy cautiously; “there's no tellin'. Mrs. Egerton didn't mention it. I'm only tellin' you what she tells me. I likes to stick to the truth. He may be married and—divorced. I 'ave 'eard of divorced 'usbands, and I don't wonder. Wimin are dry hash, Miss Hazelt.”

“Yes, yes, Sammy,” I interrupted hastily, “so you have often remarked; but don't you think he might—might be a widower?”

“No,” said Sammy with extreme firmness, “I think it's most himprobable. Wives never dies before their 'usbands, never once in their lives.”

I lay back to consider this startling proposition,

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

racking my brains for one widower amongst my somewhat limited acquaintances to refute this statement, when I caught sight of Angela's parasol on the other side of the white gate.

“Sammy,” I said, “I think I can see mother and Miss Angela. I may be wrong; but don’t you think the petunia bed requires a little weeding? Miss Angela likes the front of the house to be kept tidy.”

CHAPTER II.

ON HOW I BECAME ACQUAINTED WITH MR. INDERWICK.

AND so Mr. Inderwick was coming to live in Heatherland ! The Mr. Inderwick I knew of old, and loved so well. Yes, *loved*, and I inscribe the word with calm assurance, for I was but seven years of age in the days when I set him up on a pedestal and worshipped him with childlike ardour—the big, grave, quiet man with the slow speech and kindly smile ; the man who lifted me over the stiles and rough places and called me “little comrade.”

I smile now when I think of the manner in which I scraped acquaintance with him. It was on an afternoon of midsummer, and I was on the shore wading barefooted in a little warm pool of water left by the tide, searching for crabs and mussels and baby eels, and congratulating myself on my escape from the clutches of Miss Timmins, when a big man came along the sands. He was absorbed in a book and was a stranger to me. He appeared to be making straight for my little pool and to have every intention of walking over me. Nearer and nearer he came, and just as he was upon me I said politely—

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"Please look where you are going."

He gave quite a jump, and then began to laugh.

"Why, where have *you* sprung from?" he asked, looking down at me curiously.

"I think I might ask *you* that question," I replied with dignity. "I have been here all along."

"Oh! have you?" he said, becoming quite grave. "I beg your pardon."

I unbent at once. For anyone to beg my pardon was a new experience to me. So far I had spent my life in being made to beg other people's pardons.

"Oh, don't mention it," I said graciously, and again he smiled.

"What are you doing?" he next inquired.

"Can't you see?" I replied.

He laughed again.

"Building a fort?"

"No," I answered in disgust. "I made forts and castles when I was a little girl."

He apologised once more.

"You never knew anyone of *my* age make sand castles, did you?" I asked.

"No, perhaps not, but then—I have not known many—ladies."

This was a singularly sensible man. He clearly grasped the fact that I was *not* a little girl, and mother and Angela and Miss Timmins had always been so dull on the subject.

ACQUAINTANCE WITH MR. INDERWICK.

“Well, what *are* you doing, if it isn’t an impertinent question ? ” he asked.

“I am catching crabs and eels for my—my supper.”

His lips twitched.

“May I see ? ”

Carefully I raised the lid of my tin pail and held it up to him for his inspection.

“There are three crabs and one eel. Eels are most difficult to catch, they are so slippery,” I explained apologetically.

“How do you catch them ? ”

Still more I unbent. Angela and Miss Timmins had never displayed the faintest interest in my eel catching ; they had entirely confined their remarks to the state of my legs and feet.

“Shall I show you ? ” I asked.

“Do,” he replied.

“Well, you see those flat stones lying half-buried in the sand in that shallow pool of water ? ”

“Yes,” he answered.

“Well, will you lift them up suddenly—eels generally hide under stones—and then as they dart out I will grab at them ? ”

“What with ? ” said he.

“With my hands, of course,” I said in surprise.

“And aren’t you frightened of touching them ? ”

“Frightened ! Of course not. I should never be frightened of teeny little eels ! ” I retorted with fine scorn.

“Oh ! they are only small ? ” he asked.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"Yes," I said regretfully. "The big ones stay out in the deep water."

Gravely he set to work, turning over great big stones I had been unable to move. I thrilled with excitement. I might catch a conger!

"Isn't it exciting?" I whispered.

"Rather!" he answered.

From beneath the ninth stone an eel darted larger than my wildest hopes had imagined. With a yell I was after it, bare hands and feet and even knees being pressed into service as it wriggled across the sands in the direction of a much deeper pool of water. My breath came in gasps. "Help me!" I cried, and the next moment it was in my pail of water.

"Did I catch it, our hands seemed to get muddled up?" I inquired anxiously.

"Of course you did."

I drew a sigh of relief.

"Do you—do you think it *could* be a conger?"

"It might be," he said guardedly.

"But do you think it is?" I persisted, my heart beating.

He shook his head, and my spirits sank to zero.

"Are you *very* disappointed?" he inquired gently.

I nodded, not trusting my voice. It had been the dream of my life to catch a conger all by myself and show it to Sammy. He appeared to have caught *so many* congers when he was a boy, and all as thick as his arm.

ACQUAINTANCE WITH MR. INDERWICK.

“Well, we may get one yet,” he suggested cheerfully, “and that’s not a bad size the one you have just caught. Do you ever pick cockles? I’m told this is a famous place for cockles.”

“No,” I said regretfully. “I’m not allowed. The beds are too far out, half-way to Wales, and there are quicksands and deep channels of water.”

“And you are only allowed to go eeling?”

“Well—not exactly. I just slipped out when they weren’t looking and raced all the way. But they are less angry than they would be if I went cockling. I shall probably only get six verses of ‘Bingen on the Rhine’ to write out and half a column of spelling. You see it’s head-washing night.”

“Oh, is it?” he said with interest.

“Yes,” I continued; “and I haven’t dirtied my frock much, have I?”

“No,” he said, studying me carefully; “but you’ve got a big dab of mud on your sun-bonnet.”

“That won’t matter,” I said carelessly; “it’s going to the wash to-morrow.”

And it was just after this he made the most glorious suggestion—a suggestion which left me palpitating.

“Would you like to go cockling?” he asked suddenly.

The blood rushed into my cheeks.

“Would you?” he repeated.

For answer I skipped on my bare toes on the hot sands for some moments.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"Come along, then," he said, taking my hand in his, and away we went.

For fourteen years that afternoon has stood out like some beautiful picture from a background of dull greys. The warm, yellow sands, the blue of the sky, the gold of the sunshine as it flooded the hills in Wales, the little brown pools full of wavy, floating seaweed, the bright-coloured vetches and sea pinks nodding away on the low, grassy cliffs to the right of us, the cry of the peewits as they circled round and round above our heads, the white seagulls paddling about in the glistening wet sands in the distance, the brown-sailed fishing-boats creeping along the Channel away to the open sea, and the big, quiet man with the kind, humorous eyes and warm hand-clasp and deep-toned laugh. And the cockles! Oh, those cockles! They were sandy and exceedingly small, but they *were* cockles. No longer would I stoop to common bivalves such as mussels, or pick still commoner periwinkles. I had gathered cockles, and life from that moment took on a different aspect. Angela might scold me, Miss Timmins might punish me, mother might shake her head at me; but through it all I should be supported by the knowledge that I had picked cockles.

He took me home afterwards. When we reached the white gate of Shady Oak he made as though to leave me, but there must have been something in my face which caused him to change his mind.

"Why, I was forgetting," he said cheerfully. "I

ACQUAINTANCE WITH MR. INDERWICK.

must go in and explain matters. Poor little comrade, you got quite white."

Mother was very gracious, and I got off with an extra soaping and scrubbing in my bath that night, accompanied by a lecture from Miss Timmins, who sat in a corner of the bathroom and mentioned all the various places I should go to when I died, none of which greatly impressed me. For had I not picked cockles?

Our friendship lasted for one brief fortnight, and then he went away, and my heart was desolated. I saw him nearly every day during his stay in Heatherland, and when I didn't see him I would creep off to the Old Hall Farm, which was quite close to our house, and peep through the big iron gates, my heart palpitating for fear old Crabby, the uncle of my hero, should pounce out on me; and there I would peep and crane and stand on tiptoe, hoping for a glimpse or a word from my big, kind friend. And should I fail to see him, I felt as though the sun had suddenly gone out.

The morning he left I presented him with a gorgeous bookmarker, upon which was worked in red cotton cross-stitch—

"The Rose is red,
The Violet's blue;
Sugar is sweet,
And so are you."

He expressed great delight with it, and said he

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

should always keep it in his *Shakespeare*. I wonder if he did? But no, it is not likely. Men don't remember things. He was an event in my life—a big, important event. In his I was an incident, as slight and small and fleeting as thistledown in a wind. The bookmarker will have been lost, and I shall have been forgotten.

CHAPTER III.

SAMMY AND ROSE GOSSIP ON AN UNIMPORTANT MATTER.

A STRANGER to Heatherland, after a brief visit to our pretty village, once remarked that its inhabitants never appeared to work—only to gossip. This was an untrue statement. According to her own showing, Angela works harder than anyone in the world. I also work very hard, though mother and Angela won't believe it, and Sammy, Rose and Elizabeth work every now and then. I admit they have gossiped lately more than they have worked, and I have done my best to check them in this grievous habit. It was only this morning I remonstrated with Sammy on the subject; but he did not take much notice of what I said, in fact he might not have heard me.

“Mr. Inderwick is to arrive at the Old Hall Farm to-day, Miss Hazelt,” he volunteered.

“You said the same thing two months ago,” I replied, as I reached up for a large Victoria plum with a fascinating dry crack across its middle. (Dry cracks in plums always betoken extreme sweetness.)

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"But this time it's gospel truth, Miss Hazelt. I 'as it from Mrs. Egerton herself. I met 'er 'urryin' through the village this marnin', and she says, 'The lamps is all trimmed and lit and burnin' ready for the master's comin', and I cannot tarry wid you, Samuel Broster,' that is what she says."

"But isn't that a little extravagant at this time of day?" I suggested.

Sammy eyed me with some pity.

"A figger of speech. You mustn't take things said by wimin too literal, Miss Hazelt."

"I see," I said gravely, as I helped myself to another plum and sat down on a low branch of an apple-tree, motioning Sammy to the wheelbarrow. "And so he's really coming to-day?"

"That's so, Miss Hazelt. You'll not be disappointed *this* time."

I looked at him coldly.

"I was unaware of any disappointment in the past, Sammy. Mr. Inderwick is nothing to me."

"You was great friends wonst."

"That was many years ago."

"And you give him a bootiful bookmarker wid poetry on it."

"I shouldn't give him bookmakers now."

"Wouldn't you?"

"Certainly not."

Sammy looked at me suddenly.

"Of course, you've grown up now, Miss Hazelt?"

SAMMY AND ROSE GOSSIP.

There was a note of interrogation in his voice.

"I've been grown up for years, Sammy. I feel like that old hen mentioned in cookery books as 'Take an old fowl, tie it in muslin, and boil slowly for six hours.' "

Sammy looked at me narrowly.

"You don't look quite as old as that, Miss Hazelt."

I laughed.

"You are very encouraging, Sammy."

"Now Miss Angela, she do; she's always looked the same ever since I first know'd 'er—so neat-like and old-fashioned; an' she couldn't 'ave been much more 'n ten when the master and missis first comes to Heatherland."

"She was nine," I corrected, "and I was born the year after."

"Eh, and the master did make a fuss of you! You couldn't do wrong."

"I have made up for it since he died, according to Miss Angela," I sighed.

"Miss Angela's a bit strict-like," remarked Sammy, "and sayin' that calls to mind she wants the plums gathered to-day for presarvin'."

He got up stiffly and fetched a basket from the apple-room.

"I'll help you," I said. "I ought to be dusting the drawing-room, but perhaps they won't notice. Any more news?" I inquired indifferently after we had been picking for some time.

Sammy reflected.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"Nothin' of much interest, Miss Hazelt—only about Mr. Inderwick, and you'll be tired of 'im."

"Of course, if you have nothing of any greater importance to impart I must put up with him," I said graciously. "What's he been doing now?"

"Fishin'."

"That's not much."

"You wouldn't say so if you could jus' hear Mrs. Egerton's views on the subjec'."

"What does she say?"

"She says as how he doesn't do much 'imself when 'e gets the fever badly, as 'e just sits on a bank or in a boat as though he 'ad taken root there; it's she who does the work."

"What does she do?" I asked.

"Well, she keeps 'is meals hot for one thing; she says 'is dinner will stand for four hours, and then 'e'll come in in quite a dazed sort of way and ask if it's ready, and never listens to what she says about it, and will hainterupt 'er in the middle of a sentence and say, 'Well, never mind, Mrs. Egerton, if the dinner's not ready; I don't mind waiting a bit. You're pretty punctual as a rule; I'll just be makin' a gut cast.' And then he empties everythink out of a case on to the floor—'ooks and lines and gut—which yer catches your feet in, till your life's in constant jeopardy — those was Mrs. Egerton's very words. She says as 'ow glad she is 'e has had this last bout away from 'ome up in Norway, and that other folks

SAMMY AND ROSE GOSSIP.

'as 'ad the takin' care of him, as she was fairly done the last time."

"Mrs. Egerton appears to have a somewhat wearing time one way or another," I observed.

"She do that, but she says she puts up with 'im because 'e's a kind master in spite of his contrairy ways; and she 'as known him since 'e was a baby in long clothes, and so she stands by 'im."

"It's very kind of her."

"Yes, she's a kindly sort of body," agreed Sammy, "and a rare worker."

"What time is he expected to-day?"

Sammy considered for some moments. His memory is defective, but his imagination is great.

"Perhaps Jonah would know," I said softly.

Sammy hit out a wasp somewhat viciously.

"Between four and five this afternoon. Can't say exactly to a minute; trains is unpunctual, and then 'e's to drive from Neston, and you never knows 'ow a horse will travel."

"No, of course you don't," I assented; "and I think I must go now, as I shall be wanted in the house. Miss Angela is never really happy when I am out of her sight. Good-bye, Sammy."

I sauntered down the garden slowly with Dibbs leading the way. Dibbs always likes to be in front.

At the back-door I met mother. She was studying the butcher's book.

"Have you heard the news?" she asked, pausing

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

with a finger on a column of figures. "Mr. Inderwick is to arrive to-day."

"I have heard that before," I answered.

"But I think it must be true this time, as the butcher told Elizabeth that Mrs. Egerton had ordered five sheep's kidneys and a sirloin of beef."

"They might be for herself," I suggested.

"Most improbable," said mother. "It is hardly likely a housekeeper would dare to order sheep's kidneys for herself at fourpence a piece and the best cut of the sirloin when beef is up."

"But she must eat something," I argued.

Mother shook her head.

"Not kidneys and sirloin," she said decidedly; "liver and topside of the round if she knows her place."

I passed on upstairs to my bedroom—I thought I would take a peep at the Old Hall Farm. Rose was there engaged in cleaning the four brass knobs on the bedstead.

"Do you spend your entire existence, Rose, in cleaning the knobs on my bedstead?" I inquired.

She looked at me in surprise.

"Only once a week, Miss Hazel."

"It seems much oftener to me," I said, "but I may be wrong."

"No, only once a week," she repeated. "Am I in your way, Miss Hazel?"

"No, thanks, Rose. I was merely reflecting that I never seem to enter my room without finding you

SAMMY AND ROSE GOSSIP.

engaged in placing everything off the dressing-table on to the bed preparatory to its cleaning, or polishing the knobs."

"Once a week each, Miss Hazel," said Rose in a voice that would brook of no argument.

I strolled to the window. By leaning out I knew that through a break in the dense foliage of the oak trees which encircle our front garden I should be able to get a good view of the Old Hall Farm; but, of course, Rose was there, and she was only on the second knob. I glanced at her furtively and found she was staring at me hard. Dropping on to a chair, I took up a piece of work.

"Never knew you to sew in a morning before, Miss Hazel," she observed cheerfully.

I made no reply.

"Mr. Inderwick's comin' to the Old Hall Farm to-day," she volunteered next.

I began to feel a deep pity for Mr. Inderwick. Had he realised what living in a small country village in a remote corner of Cheshire would mean? Was he prepared for the moral and mental dissection which he would be bound to undergo? Poor, wretched man!

"Indeed!" I replied coldly.

"Yes; his luggage came yesterday. Only one portmanteau, no trunk, and six wooden cases. Father helped to carry 'em in, and he says they were that 'eavy he shouldn't be surprised as they turned out to be books."

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

I began to be interested, but Angela says it is undignified to gossip with a housemaid. My talks with Sammy are on a different basis—he is an old and valued retainer.

“A servant’s engaged, too; fancy, a servant as well as a ‘ousekeeper for one gentleman! And she’s got a fringe.”

There was a note of envy and soreness in Rose’s voice which touched me. Angela will not permit fringes to the servants; she says they are common. Her own fringeless forehead reminds one of a round, polished dome.

“Never mind, Rose,” I said gently. “Your hair is very pretty and wavy. I wish mine were as nice.”

Rose peeped at herself in the looking-glass and then blushed.

“It must be nice living with a single gentleman; don’t you think so, Miss Hazel?”

“I’ve never tried it,” I replied guardedly.

“I don’t suppose they’d go holding all the tumblers to the light after you had washed them to see as they was clean, or go scrattlin’ under the mats lookin’ for crumbs, or drawing their fingers along the top of the balisters searchin’ for dust.”

There was real grievance in Rose’s tones now, and she attacked the third knob with alarming energy.

A sound of wheels came from the cobble-paved village; it was too self-contained and superior for a cart; it was much too early for Mrs. Moss or Mrs. Hawthorn to be taking their daily drive. I

SAMMY AND ROSE GOSSIP.

glanced at Rose; her back was to me, and she was still taken up with her grievance. With stealth I crept to the open window and leaned out. A smart dog-cart flashed by; it contained two men, but I could not see their faces. Still further I leaned out, craning my neck.

“That must be Mr. Inderwick.”

The voice came from the small of my back, and I started so violently that I nearly lost my balance.

“Rose,” I said severely, “I wish you would get on with your work. It is simply disgraceful the way you waste your time. You have been over half an hour in cleaning three small bed-knobs. It is nothing to you whether it is Mr. Inderwick or not Mr. Inderwick. Try and check this spirit of curiosity.” And I swept from the room, leaving Rose with a most astonished countenance.

CHAPTER IV.

I RECEIVE A SNUB FROM MR. INDERWICK WHICH RENDERS ME ANGRY.

NO one likes to be snubbed. Least of all a woman by a man, especially when the snub is unwarranted. Mr. Inderwick has snubbed me, and I can never forgive him. I smiled at him last Sunday in church. The smile was one of pure friendship, of good fellowship. It came from me suddenly, before I could stop it. It was not pre-meditated; it came like a flash when I caught sight of him. And in return—my cheeks still flame when I think of it—he just stared at me, a surprised, prolonged, superior, raised-eyebrows sort of stare; a stare that first seemed to turn me to stone, and then sent me down on my knees for the Litany as though I had been shot; a stare that has burnt into my brain, into my being. Shall I ever forget it? Shall I ever forget that the entire congregation of Heatherland witnessed my discomforture (for it seemed to me that the eye of every woman of the village was fixed upon me unflinchingly)? and shall I always be shut up inside our own garden gate for the remainder

I RECEIVE A SNUB.

of my natural life? I dare not go out; I simply dare not run the risk of again encountering that petrified gaze.

Now, *I* should have behaved so differently under the circumstances had *I* been a man. Were nice girls to smile at *me* in church, *I* should just smile back at them whether they were known to *me* or not, and enjoy myself immensely. *I* should certainly not assume that exclusive, monarch-of-all-*I*-survey air; *I* should accept with gratitude any kindness shown to *me*.

Miss Timmins used to say men were a snare and a delusion. She invariably giggled when she said this, and scratched her left shoulder-blade with her right hand. Angela said men were untidy, unpunctual, and unreliable. And *I*, from a spirit of opposition, said they were much nicer than women and *I* loved them. None of our opinions were of the slightest value to the world, for men, with the exception of dear father, were a genus unknown to us. Country villages do not produce men, they only run to women and cows and crops. Of course there are a few fathers with nicely-combed beards who give half-a-crown to the collection on Sunday, and drive in nicely-appointed carriages to the city each day to do something in cotton or shipping, but they don't count. Fathers naturally don't count as ordinary men, neither does Frederick Moss, for he is half a poet and plays the organ in church. And now *I* withdraw all that *I* said about men in the past—I

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

don't think they are nicer than women, and I hate them.

I might have known everything would go wrong last Sunday. Things always do on a Sunday. Perhaps it is through wearing your best frock, or having kidney with your bacon for breakfast. The Lord may think you are self-indulgent, and send trouble to balance things up.

The sun and clematis together woke me—that was the only nice bit in the day. The sun was so cheerful and expansive, and the clematis tapped its velvety cups against the window-pane, and they peeped in and said—

“Get up, it's grand out here.”

They only whispered it, but I heard them.

“Not just yet,” I murmured sleepily. “Rose hasn't been to call me. I never get up till I'm called.”

“Lazybones!” they laughed. “Do you know this is just the kind of morning you love best in the world—sunny, hazy, dewy September, and the drenched dahlias and grass and bushes are drying their garments in the sunshine.”

I opened one eye, but the lid of the other was too heavy to lift. Then they began again—

“I should get up if I were you. Away on Oldfield Common is a most exquisite carpet of purple and gold—it is only heather and gorse, but the scent is something divine. All the bees and bumble-bees of Heatherland are assembled there, and are humming

I RECEIVE A SNUB.

and buzzing as though they had struck a gold mine."

"I have smelt heather and gorse and seen bees before," I said firmly.

Then they became artful.

"Mr. Inderwick will probably be in church to-day; he used to go to church in the old days, and—"

In a twinkling my bare feet were standing on a warm patch of sunlight which hovered about the faded pink rhododendrons on the carpet.

"I don't believe it," I remarked casually. "I am only getting up because it is time. I am sure Mr. Inderwick won't be at church. Men don't go much to church unless they are married, mother says, and then they go for peace and quietness, as their wives worry them so."

I sat down by the window and fell to thinking—what should I wear. I would like to look nice this particular Sunday, because—why, because it is a duty a girl owes to herself and her friends to look her best. Dowdy women are an eyesore.

I walked across to the wardrobe. It was quite unnecessary. I knew every garment I possessed off by heart. There was the old brown merino in which I do spring cleaning; Heatherland at one time knew it well, though a lapse of years might have caused it to be forgotten; that wouldn't do. There was a blue print frock which had shrunk in washing; a tuck had been let down, and people who might

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

have forgotten the original colour of the print could now refresh their memories by gazing at the place where the tuck had been. Angela says it doesn't matter as it looks like a trimming. Angela has more faith in the imaginativeness of people than I. A pink cashmere I condemned at once—mother and Angela always insist on my buying the "good old materials," as they call them, like merino and cashmere—I look like an orphaned shrimp in it, about to be picked, and it has a gooseberry stain on the sleeve. It is supposed to be my best summer frock, but if I can wriggle out of wearing it and get into an old, black grenadine I have had for years, I do. There was only a white muslin left, the prettiest of the lot, frilly and fluffy, with lots of tucks; it caused me to be bankrupt for months, and I was obliged to sell some old clothes to Mrs. Flutterby, the washer-woman, to pay for the making. I recollect Angela came in while I was transacting this little business, and I had to whisk the clothes into an empty dolly-tub and then stand in front of it. I thought she never *would* leave the wash-house, and she eyed me in the same way as she does tramps when they are out of work.

I fingered the muslin for some little time; I patted the frills and tucks, and stroked the soft fichu. How pretty it was! Would Angela say it was out of place in church, and ridiculous to wear in September? And if she did, why should I mind? It was my body and not hers I proposed to clothe in it. It

I RECEIVE A SNUB.

was a pity never to wear it, and it would soon be old-fashioned.

A knock came at the door.

"Are you up, Hazel?"

My sister never omits to ask this question each morning.

"Yes," I replied.

"You are very quiet."

"Would you have me make a noise like a battering-ram when I am dressing?"

"But you have not had your bath. I have finished mine."

This is another little peculiarity of Angela's. She always tells you when she has had a bath, just as though she were the only clean person in the world. But then I think she is no different to any other woman in this respect. They all tell you when they have had cold baths, perhaps not directly, but it comes in somehow: "When I was having my cold tub this morning the thought struck me," &c.; or, "Wasn't the water cold this morning?"

I opened the door suddenly, and nearly upset Angela.

"Why, you are still in your nightgown!" she ejaculated.

"Would you wish me to walk about the house without one?" I said politely as I passed into the bathroom.

"You will be late as usual," she shouted above the noise of the running water.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

She may have said other things as well, but I was splashing vigorously and her voice was drowned. I admit it was a little impolite of me, but then it *does* get monotonous hearing the same old thing morning after morning, that I shall be late; Angela varies her conversation so little. Besides, I wanted to finish thinking out my costume for the day. Should it be the white, and risk the dropping out of my sister's eyes, or should it be the shrimp-pink, as the grenadine had a hole in the elbow? Slowly and thoughtfully I got into my clothes and did my hair. It would be delicious to walk down the aisle with a white train sweeping after me. How Rosabel Hawthorn would stare! *She* always wears a train on Sunday, but I have never been allowed. Mother and Angela say a true lady dresses in a quiet and modest way on the Sabbath. I cannot see why a train should be considered *im*-modest; I should have thought it was the other way about. I kept glancing at the interior of the wardrobe, and then out at the sunshine. It was certainly warm enough, and so bright. There might just be one wee cloud on the horizon, but it was no bigger than a man's hand, and was probably caused by smoke from a steamer on its way to the Irish Sea. I would wear the white. Firmly I advanced to the wardrobe, deliberately I slipped the skirt over my head, carefully I fastened the fichu of the bodice with a pearl brooch, and with pleasure I gazed at my slim, white reflection in the

I RECEIVE A SNUB.

mirror. It was nice to feel well dressed. I felt brave enough to have given notice to a servant in that skirt. The cut of a garment will send up one's self-confidence in a wonderful way.

"Hazel," Angela's voice came down the passage, "mother says you are not to wear your old, black grenadine to-day, as the sleeve wants mending."

In a panic, I was at the door and quickly turned the key in the lock.

"Very well," I called.

"What are you locking your door for? Are you going to read your Scripture portion?"

My sister's voice was full of curiosity as she turned the handle.

"Angela," I said, "go away, or I shall say something rude."

I listened to her retreating footsteps, and then began to unfasten my frock. I simply *dare* not wear it. Half-way through the hooks I stopped. My eyes had caught sight of a text over the washstand—"Be strong and of a good courage," but that surely referred to being good, and not to the wearing of white gowns. I went on with the unfastening of the hooks, and reached out the shrimpy pink. I would not glance at myself in the mirror, I knew so exactly how I looked in that pink—a Sunday-school teacher out for a picnic. I wandered to the open window, and my gaze fell upon the Old Hall Farm and the two fir trees standing like sentinels in front of it. In a flash I saw myself in church, and Mr.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

Inderwick staring at my wrinkly pink back and skimpy skirt. It could not be endured. Five minutes later I was running down the stairs, holding up my white train, as the gong went for the third time.

Angela had got as far as her second helping of bacon and bread and drip. She was in the act of raising a comfortable-sized piece on the end of her fork to her mouth as I entered the room. Her fork stopped half-way, and her mouth remained open as I kissed mother, patted Dibbs, and took my place.

“Do I look as nice as all that?” I inquired amiably as I helped myself to a piece of toast. “Should you mind giving me some bacon and kidney?” I next suggested mildly, as my sister’s eyes remained rooted on my person.

Mechanically her jaws closed on the bread and drip as she removed the dish cover, but her eyes never left me for a single moment.

“What have you got your garden party frock on for?” she breathed at length.

“Angela,” I said, “you should never end a sentence with a preposition; it is a bad style.”

Sunday is the only day on which I am courageous in my dealings with Angela. It would be so wrong of her to lose her temper when she goes to church twice and Sunday-school once.

“Mother, why is Hazel wearing her garden party dress?”

Dear mother looked worried, and shuffled behind

I RECEIVE A SNUB.

the tea-cosy. She felt that Angela for some reason was annoyed, and she does not like Angela to be annoyed. She looked at me appealingly, and her cap slipped a little to one side.

"Angela," I said, "I am quite capable of answering for myself. I am wearing this gown because it suits me to do so. And please do not speak of it as my garden party dress. I don't go to garden parties, as you are aware. People in Heatherland don't give them."

Angela breathed hard.

"Are you going to church in it?"

"Certainly," I replied.

She lifted her hands in horror.

"And after all your training! to go decked out like a common village girl on a Whit-Sunday! I should be ashamed to be seen with you. It's disgraceful. What *will* Mrs. Oates think?"

With an effort I fought down my rising anger.

"It does not trouble me what Mrs. Oates may think. She will probably be envious that *she* is not young enough to wear white, and will wish that her waist was of more normal proportions. And if you object to being seen with me, I will go to another seat. I have always had a desire to sit in the gallery."

Mother shook her head at me.

"Perhaps your sister is right. You had better change it after breakfast, Hazel."

"But do *you* think white—simple white muslin—

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

is out of place in a church, mother? You know you used to wear coloured muslins when you were a girl. You know you did; you have told me so."

She looked at Angela.

"I don't think white matters so much," she began hesitatingly. "But——"

"Well, that settles it," I broke in. "So long as you don't object I shall wear it."

I was amazed at my own temerity, and hurried out of the room. I rarely fight Angela. Few things are worth the trouble; and besides, mother always takes her part, and two are more than I can combat.

Before going to church I fastened some yellow roses into my fichu. Again Angela got me wild by remarking that I might be going to a wedding. She said it under her breath, but of course she meant me to hear. I crunched down the gravel walk in front of her to the gate, not daring to let myself speak—if I once let myself go there would be a row. And for mother's sake—well, for mother's sake, I didn't call Angela a common, yellow, kitchen cat, though I repeated, it to myself several times over as we walked down the lane to the church—"Angela is a common, yellow, kitchen cat" and it brought me some relief. I was still repeating it as I passed down the aisle and along the seat to my place in the corner and knelt on a hard hassock. Angela is High Church, and she bowed low before entering the pew. Suddenly the thought came to me—how comical for a yellow, kitchen cat to be High Church. I stifled a

I RECEIVE A SNUB.

laugh, and Angela eyed me with extreme disapproval. With an effort I pulled myself together, and looking up at the east window tried to pray ; nothing would come but "Angela is a common, yellow, kitchen cat." I ought to have been overwhelmed at my wickedness, at my irreverence, but strangely enough I wasn't. I felt somehow that God would be understanding. He had created Angela, so would know all about her. He would know how trying she was, what a thorn in the flesh. I am convinced St. Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was an Angela, or why was he so down upon women ?

Mr. Oates's stentorian "Dearly beloved brethren" called me to attention. I felt a little tired of Mr. Oates ; he is so noisy, and uses his handkerchief so frequently, which he waves like a flag. I was tired, too, of Mrs. Oates's boat-shaped hat, which is kept on by a shabby, stringy piece of elastic and a jet button. I wished she would get a new one ; boat-shaped hats are not pretty, and she would look much better in a bonnet.

My eyes wandered to mother. She wore an absorbed, happy, uplifted expression. Mother is really religious ; prayer is a true pleasure to her, and her Sunday reading of the *Church Times* one of her pleasantest relaxations. The mauve bow in her best bonnet looked reverent and Sundayfied, her mantle reminded one of saints' days, and her very gloves were black kid and devout. She had forgotten her housekeeping and account books, and Angela's and

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

my "little differences," as she calls them. Her soul and mind and spirit were, for the moment, above the things of this world. Dear old mother, how perfect she would be but for her shortsightedness in loving her elder daughter better than her younger! She is so very nice when you get her quite alone to yourself!

I passed on to Angela. Her face beneath its fawn velvet hat was inscrutable. She bowed low in the Creed and never raised her eyes from her vellum-backed Prayer-book.

The Miss Trimmingtons I regarded with friendly eye, and admired their pretty, grey, bobbing curls. I shall begin curls when I am fifty; they are such a soft frame to little, old faces.

From the Miss Trimmingtons I wandered on to Sammy away in the north aisle. I felt fearful of his expending so much energy on "Onward, Christian Soldiers." His cheeks were quite purple and the day was hot. I glanced round to see if the door were open, and—fell right upon Mr. Inderwick. The encounter was so sudden, so unexpected—I had completely forgotten him—that for a moment my heart seemed to stand still. And then I smiled that wide, friendly, intimate smile. As in the twinkling of an eye fourteen years slipped away from me. I was no longer Hazel Wycherley, grown up, but a little, thin, freckled, happy girl standing bare-footed in a pool of water, poking about with a stick for crabs and mussels and nimbly-darting eels, and

I RECEIVE A SNUB.

skipping along the warm sands at the side of a big, grave, kind man. The church faded from view, the congregation vanished, Mr. Oates's voice ceased. I was alone with my dear old friend, quite alone in the sunshine, and in the gladness of my heart I smiled, smiled happily, smiled a welcome, and—he did not return it. Shall I ever forget it? Not a flicker of recognition, of interest even—just that petrified stare of surprise.

Have I ever loved the Litany so much as I buried my burning face in my hands? Ever been so grateful to it for its length? Ever loved the King and Queen and all the Royal Family, and the bishops and priests and the different people for whom we intercede, more devoutly. At its close Angela had to nudge me to get up. I longed for that Litany to go on for ever.

How did I get through the rest of the service and the long, dreary sermon? One thing supported me; I had decided to feel faint. As the last hymn was given out I would be seized with a sudden faintness and slip out of the church. Or perhaps it would be better during the prayer after the collection, when mother and Angela were not looking. Of one thing I was certain, I could not and would not run the risk of being banged up against *that* man at the end of the service. It was just the sort of thing Fate would glory in doing. The collection was over, the congregation was down on its knees, and swiftly and stealthily I crept from the church.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

Jonah, full of solicitude, bore down upon me in the porch ; but I waved him on one side, and, taking to my heels, I flew—flew as I had never flown before, and never drawing breath till I lay on the grass beneath the friendly shade of the sycamore tree.

Five minutes later mother and Angela crossed the lawn, their faces full of burning interest and anxiety. In her haste mother was holding her skirt too high, and I felt obliged to refer to this.

“ What is it ? What is the matter ? ” they cried together.

With a little inward gasp I realised I should have to tell lies. I dislike lying exceedingly. Mother herself is the soul of honour, and has brought us up to regard lying in the same light as committing murder or stealing loaves of bread. But there was Angela ! How could I tell Angela of my humiliation ? It was impossible, insupportable. I would sooner a thousand times over break *every* one of the commandments.

“ I was not well ; the church was hot,” I replied, looking into space.

“ Not well ! ”

Their astonishment was excessive.

“ No,” I said, closing my eyes.

“ Dear me ! ” observed mother.

“ How extraordinary ! ” ejaculated Angela.

They stood and stared at me ; my eyes were closed, but I knew they were staring.

I RECEIVE A SNUB.

“Your colour is good,” remarked Angela at length.

“It may be the heat,” said mother.

I wanted to get up and kiss her, but desisted.

“I never before knew people who were not well to have a good colour,” persisted my sister.

“What about apoplexy?” I said, opening my eyes.

Mother jumped.

“You have not got apoplexy,” said Angela with decision.

“Whatever be the matter,” interrupted mother, “I consider it is most foolish to lie on the grass. You had better go to the drawing-room sofa, and we will bring you your dinner there, and you shall have my salts and a fan. Your dear father used to be taken in this way.”

“I am feeling better now,” I murmured, as I got up.

The prospect of the hard drawing-room sofa was anything but attractive.

“Take my arm,” said mother; “it is a blessing you did not faint on your way home. Why did you not whisper to Angela?”

“Angela doesn’t like whispering in church,” I said.

“It would not have mattered for once,” said mother, as she placed a woolwork cushion at the back of my head and held some pungent salts to my nose.

I was kept on the sofa for the remainder of the

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

day, and I think my punishment was greater than I deserved, for all I had done was to smile at a man and tell one lie to mother and Angela. One smile plus one lie equals one day spent on a hard sofa without springs listening to mother and Angela discussing our identity with the "ten lost tribes of Israel."

CHAPTER V.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH MR. INDERWICK.

ON Tuesday afternoon I was engaged in picking earwigs out of the dahlias, when mother came out and requested me to go to Gayton for sausages, as she had heard that Eliza Slightfoot had killed a pig.

I told her I was tired, and she looked surprised.

“What with?” said she; and I had nothing to say, for catching earwigs is not laborious work.

“Don’t you think it is rather early for sausages?” I asked.

“Not at all,” said mother with decision. “Eliza Slightfoot knows her business, and September is the correct month in which to kill small porkers. Don’t you want to go?” she finished, looking at me curiously.

“Oh, yes!” I replied hastily, which made my hundred-and-seventh fib in nine days.

“Take Dibbs,” called out mother; and I took Dibbs, and he was the cause of my running up against the man whom I have been avoiding as I would one afflicted with the plague.

Dibbs scented a rabbit. Dibbs is always scenting

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

a rabbit. It would be impossible to state the number of days on which he has not scented rabbits and been shot at by irate gamekeepers. Some day I shall let him be shot, and then it will teach him a lesson.

It was round by Gayton Hall that his nostrils first began to quiver and dilate and his body to tremble. I knew the symptoms well.

“Dibbs,” I said sternly, “get to heel.”

He took not the faintest notice of my command, and his whole body vibrated and trembled as with an ague.

“Dibbs,” I repeated still more sternly.

More vibrations, then a sudden dart across a field and the vanishing of a white tail into a thicket—the same thicket into which it has been vanishing for many years, and whose geographical position I am always hoping he may chance to forget.

Guns were popping in the distance from the far end of the stubby field. Dibbs would be shot this time; my little wall-eyed fox-terrier would creep under a bush and bleed to death.

“Dibbs ! ” I entreated, cajoled, commanded, yelled, till my throat was hoarse and my temper shocking. No response. Rapidly the different forms of punishment I would mete out to him when I *did* catch him passed through my mind—a good whipping, I would put him on the leash, no bones for two days, no walk for a week. Full of stern resolve, I was just preparing to scale a five-barred

AN ENCOUNTER WITH MR. INDERWICK.

gate to go after him, when an exceedingly large and somewhat soiled-looking man turned the corner of the lane and bore down upon me. It was Mr. Inderwick. *Of course* it was Mr. Inderwick. Have I not ever observed that should you be desirous of avoiding the Mr. Inderwicks of this world you are bound to tumble across them. It is Fate's playful little way of giving you a good time. The population of Heatherland is seven hundred, the village straggles, it contains many lanes and field-paths, and out of the whole of that population Mr. Inderwick should chance to be the man to select the particular lane in which I was standing to prowl about like a tramp.

All my shame and nervousness of him had vanished. I had forgotten my wide, friendly smile; I had forgotten his snub. I simply felt angry—angry that he should be there.

Climbing the gate slowly, and seating myself on the topmost bar, I deliberately turned my back on the advancing figure and fell to admiring the sunset.

He would pass, of course. He did not know me; and even if, by the remotest chance, he were to recognise my aggressive back, he would understand I was “doing” sunsets, and would naturally resent an interruption. No one likes to be disturbed when communing with Nature. He would appreciate this. The footsteps came nearer and nearer, paused, and then stopped just behind me. My back became as a ramrod and my neck and head stiffened as in a

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

vice. What impertinence! What did he mean by daring to stop?

He stood for a moment in silence, then he said very politely and very pleasantly—

“Good afternoon, Miss Hazel.”

It must have been about the fraction of an inch that I permitted my head to turn in his direction, then “Sir,” said I in tones of ice, “you have the advantage of me.”

I could feel his little start of surprise.

“I beg your pardon,” said he, “but are you not— are you not my old friend Miss Hazel Wycherley? Surely I cannot be mistaken?”

His voice was deep, almost gruff, but there was a friendly ring in it. Momentarily I relaxed, I turned my head round a shade further. Then my smile and his stare thrust themselves before my vision. If he knew me now, why not on Sunday?

“Certainly, I am Hazel Wycherley. You are not mistaken in my name, but—at the moment—I regret to say that I am unable to claim the honour of your friendship. You have made a mistake in that respect. I must bid you good afternoon,” and once again I turned my face to the sunset.

Now of course he would go away. No man would *dare* to stay after such a rebuff. But nothing of the kind, he simply came a little closer to me, leaned the gun he was carrying against the gate, and studied my profile carefully and critically. Never have I experienced anything more trying than that pro-

AN ENCOUNTER WITH MR. INDERWICK.

longed scrutiny. I felt the colour rush into my cheeks and my hands trembled. Presently he said calmly—

“Yes, you *are* Hazel Wycherley. I thought I could not be mistaken. Excuse my persistence, I do not wish to appear rude, but—I am Robert Inderwick. You and I were good friends and boon companions in the old days, when you were quite a little girl. We went cockling together, and caught an eel—almost as big as a conger, and you gave me a beautiful bookmarker. Now don’t you remember me? I hope you do. I should be sorry—if you had forgotten me. I have always kept the bookmarker.”

In spite of myself I softened. So he had kept the bookmarker. He had not forgotten. But why—why that frozen stare in church? Why had he humiliated me in the presence of all the women of Heatherland? I whipped up my anger, then I turned round and faced him squarely, studying him with seeming interest.

“Oh, is it Mr. Inderwick?”—I spoke lightly and with some surprise—“the Mr. Inderwick who has come to live at the Old Hall Farm, and about whose movements Heatherland is all agog? How remiss of me to have forgotten you! But—but childish friendships rarely withstand the lapse of years. I—should not have known you. I am sorry, and—I will bid you good-day, sir; I am in a hurry.”

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

I climbed down from the gate. Gravely he offered me his hand, but I refused his help. Suddenly I felt small, babyish, futile, ineffectual, there was a look of quiet amusement in the corners of his eyes and the flicker of his firm, clean-shaved lips as, picking up his gun, he said—

“I won’t detain you longer. I must apologise for thrusting myself upon you. I should have waited for a re-introduction ; but—well, you were such a jolly little girl in the old days, and I thought you might not have forgotten me. I am sorry.”

He raised his cap, and the next moment he had gone.

I stamped my foot with temper as I watched his square figure retreating down the lane, looking for all the world like a solid Rock of Gibraltar which had been bombarded by a small popgun. I realised that I had not only been extremely rude, but a fool. And that Mr. Inderwick thought me such had showed only too plainly in his amused smile.

Why did he go away so quickly ? Why do men take girls so literally ? He might—if he had had one grain of perception—have seen I was beginning to unbend and wanted him to stay. Men *are* so dense. It is pitiful. And now he thinks me rude, ungracious and ill-bred ; and so I am, all three, and an idiot into the bargain. Here have I been simply longing for a man friend for months. I am *so* tired

AN ENCOUNTER WITH MR. INDERWICK.

of women—even our oil stove is feminine—it is called Consuela; and I am weary of Frederick Moss and his love-making and silly poems which always begin—

“Oh, Hazel, of the deep blue eyes
And hair of raven hue.”

And then the first nice man (I can see he is nice) who comes along and offers his hand to me in friendship, if I don't go and thrust it rudely aside without offering any explanation for so doing, and altogether behave like a rude, gauche, schoolgirl miss. And all because my vanity had been assailed, because my pride was up in arms, because I imagined I had been intentionally snubbed by a man, when—when I don't suppose he even saw me, and if he did would probably think I was smiling at someone else, at someone beyond him, someone I knew well. He would never dream I *could* be smiling at him—a comparative stranger, and his look of surprise was purely a trick of my own imagination. I was a narrow, self-centred, stuck-up, country-bred creature, attaching vital importance to the most trifling events, imagining myself the hub of the universe, with no power of seeing beyond my own nose or getting outside my own environment; the product of a village and the smallest thing in it.

I climbed over the gate, tore across the stubbly field, and came across Dibbs just as he was careering out of the thicket with a flushed look of victory

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

about him. With canine instinct he instantly appreciated my frame of mind and temper. His tail dropped and clung to his hind legs, he fell flat on his stomach, and like an abject worm crawled across the rough stubble to meet me.

"Yes, Dibbs," I said, "you are going to be thrashed. You have got me into a fine mess, and you must suffer for it."

And then I thrashed him. I hit harder than usual, and Dibbs seemed very surprised. He turned his poor wall eye upon me reproachfully, and gave a little whine.

As soon as I had finished I felt remorseful, and taking him up in my arms I kissed his poor, sore back. This seemed to surprise him still more, and he fell to licking my face.

Then I wept over him, and this seemed to surprise him most, for sitting up on his hind legs he gave vent to a doleful howl.

"Oh, Dibbs," I moaned, putting my arms round his neck, "I am the most wretched girl in the world. I am sick of everything. I am sick of my life, I am sick of housework, I am sick of Heatherland, and, above all, I am most sick of myself," and again dear old Dibbs gave a little howl of sympathy. Then I wiped away my tears, gathered myself up, and went in quest of sausages.

When I arrived home it was quite dark. The lamps were lit, and Angela was singing *Home, Sweet Home* to an accompaniment of *arpeggios*. I fled to

AN ENCOUNTER WITH MR. INDERWICK.

my room, and, kneeling down, I said, "Lord, may I be something male in the next life. I don't care what it is, a weazel even, so long as it is not female." Then I went down to tea, and afterwards hemmed a new dust sheet, while mother read aloud extracts from a report of the Church Congress, in which Angela was greatly interested.

Just before prayers my sister said—

"We hear Mr. Inderwick was in church last Sunday week, Hazel. It was unfortunate you should have been taken ill that morning, as we might have spoken to him coming out, and as it was we didn't even see him. Mrs. Moss and Mrs. Hawthorn and Mrs. Oates all spoke to him."

"Indeed," I said.

"Yes. They have been making some inquiries about his antecedents, and they are quite satisfactory, and he himself has been to a university, I don't know which, but we shall be able to know him."

There was a ring of patronage in Angela's voice which exasperated me.

"How nice for him," I said gently.

She raised her eyes from her sewing.

"Yes, it is a great advantage to a young man to be received into good families," she answered.

"Is ours good? We have a cousin who is a draper," I observed.

Angela looked shocked.

"Only by marriage," she said quickly. "He is

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

no blood relation, and we have never even seen him."

"I should like to know him. A draper in the family would be very useful," I said softly.

She did not answer, and, reaching out the Bible and Prayer-book, rang the bell for the servants with unusual strength.

CHAPTER VI.

I GO ON A VISIT TO AUNT MENELOPHE.

I AM visiting Step-aunt Menelophe, and am seated before a bright little wood fire—as the evenings are chilly—in a lovely, romantic bedroom called “The Ghost Room.” Aunt Menelophe thought I should be nervous to sleep here alone, as it is down a winding sort of corridor, quite a good way from all the other bedrooms; but as soon as ever she told me about it I begged to be put here. I said, “It’s not often that one gets a chance of sleeping in a real ghost room at an old hall, and it would be a shame to allow such an opportunity for romance to be wasted.”

And Aunt Menelophe smiled, and ordered a fire to be lit each evening to keep me company. So far nothing has happened, and I really don’t know what I ought to expect, as everybody in the house seems divided as to the real legend of the room. The butler says a goat with two tails should clank through the place in chains at twelve o’clock at night. He does not give any reason for its doing this. Aunt Menelophe says it should be a woman

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

dressed in white (I often think what an expensive item a ghost's laundry must be, as it is always composed of white), who takes up a position at the foot of the bed and then groans three times. And Butterby—who is aunt's youngest son—says it should be an enormous toad with a man's head, three hundred years old, which crawls on to your bed and spits three times, and then vanishes through the bed and floor. I must say I like the sound of the toad the least, especially as it appears to have vulgar habits.

Up to the present—and I have been here for four days—nothing spectral, bogey, repulsive, uncanny, cadaverous, or gruesome has appeared. I fasten my eyes on all the little, dim, ghostly corners of the room, rendered more uncanny by the flickering light of the dying fire, but I see nothing. My eyes begin to get tired and heavy; I nod and doze, and blink and nod, and dream little funny dreams, till sleep overpowers me, and I know nothing more till Parkins rouses me with morning tea.

If anyone had told me ten days ago that I should be staying with Aunt Menelophe and sitting up here in the famous ghost room writing to-night, I should have said that person had a most powerful imagination.

It happened this way. One morning last week mother received a letter from Aunt Menelophe, who is father's eldest step-sister. This was the letter—

A VISIT TO AUNT MENEOPHE.

“THE HALL, BLONGTON, STAFFS.,
“September 23rd, —.

“MY DEAR ELIZABETH,—

“It is many years since we met, and you and I are now widows, and I trust are each bearing our loss with fortitude. My husband was a martyr to gout. It was a happy release when he was taken. Yours was one of those rare men whose language was as controlled as his temper. John Wycherley was God's eighth creation. Your loss was heaven's gain.

“I believe you have two nice daughters. I have three moderately satisfactory sons. The eldest—Wellesley—is in London on a paper. The second—Dick—is supposed to be living at home. I see him when he is ill and occasionally on Sundays. I rise late and go to bed early. The youngest—Butterby, a family name—is a naturalist. In his spare time he manages the Swedgwood Pottery Works, and often expresses his surprise at the manner in which the Americans forge ahead. Possibly America does not grow moths and butterflies.

“You will gather from this I am somewhat lonely. The Lord thought fit to remove my only daughter. I do not question His ways. Just now I am depressed after a long illness. Will you lend me one of your daughters for three weeks—the livelier of the two for choice? I will return her at the expiration of that period. I will do the best I can to render her visit pleasant. Blongton is not a gay place. It makes pots, and exists beneath a heavy pall of smoke. All our energies are concentrated in removing the dirt

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

from our persons and houses, so we have no superfluous strength for festivities. An occasional dinner party is our only relaxation, and that is very occasional. I feel I must tell you this, so that if one of your daughters should take pity on a lonely old woman she will be under no misapprehension.

“Your affectionate step-sister-in-law,
“MENELOPHE MENZIES.”

“P.S.—Next Tuesday would suit me. There is a good train from Birkenhead at one o'clock. Change at Crewe. The dog-cart shall meet her. Only one dinner gown necessary. I wonder if you wear caps.—
M. M.”

We read this letter through three times, and then Angela said, “What a calm person!”

“Yes,” said mother, “she was always peculiar, and fond of your father” (mother didn't know she had said anything in the least funny). “She was very clever and extraordinarily handsome as a young woman.”

“And,” said I, “I like her. Anyone who said such a thing about father must be nice.”

“Very well, then,” said mother, “you shall be the one to go.”

This rapid decision on mother's part, without consulting Angela, astonished and delighted me. I could have jumped for joy. I panted to get away from Heatherland and that objectionable, horrid man. Could anything have been more opportune?

A VISIT TO AUNT MENEOPHE.

But I mustn't appear too keen, or Angela, as the elder, might think it was her duty to go and cheer up Aunt Menelophe, and Angela is faithful to duty. I must dissemble.

"But I am not lively, mother, and I don't think I want to go," I asserted.

"Yes, you are; you are very lively—boisterous almost at times. We should be very dull without you. But lately you have seemed depressed, and have not even gone blackberrying. You evidently want a change," finished mother conclusively, and she looked towards Angela for support.

"But, mother," I cried, "it will be too awful to go and feel I must be a drawing-room entertainment, a clown at a pantomime, and a performing dog at a fair rolled in one, just for Aunt Menelophe's amusement. I should be worn to a shadow in three weeks."

"No, you wouldn't. Just be your natural, bright, happy self, and Aunt Menelophe will be quite satisfied." (There are times when I love mother much more than at others.)

"But wouldn't Angela like to go?" I inquired politely.

"No, thank you," replied my elder sister. "Life is too serious, to my thinking, to be spent in laughing and giggling and being funny. Besides, too, I couldn't be spared. There are my old women and Sunday-school class, and the walnuts to pickle—they are just ripe."

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

“Well, that settles it,” said mother. “Hazel must be ready to start by Tuesday morning at eight o’clock. She will have some time to wait at Birkenhead for the train, but that can’t be helped. I couldn’t afford cabs, even if there were any; but she shall have a new dinner gown—as Aunt Menelophe calls it, though I like the old-fashioned word ‘dress’ better—out of the sundries money tin box, and Reas, of Basnett Street, shall make it.”

Then mother got out her three purses and four tin cash-boxes and plunged into a labyrinth of ways and means; I could see that she thought that gown would land us in the bankruptcy court before we could look round.

“But you shall have it, Hazel,” she said, with an effort at cheerfulness; “you shan’t disgrace your father’s family.”

And I *was* ready at eight o’clock on Tuesday morning. Wild horses would not have prevented my being ready. I was up at six, and when I went to the window to feast my eyes, as usual, on my dear Dee and blue Welsh hills they were nowhere to be seen. There had been a sharp frost in the night, and now great banks of white mist blotted out the entire landscape; the fields, the Old Hall Farm, the river, and the hills—all had gone. The lawn lay dimly in front of me, and the brilliant-coloured flowers of autumn—dahlias, hollyhocks, snapdragons, and phlox—stood out from the mist like spectres, and the love-lies-bleeding, lying in the soaking wet

A VISIT TO AUNT MENELOPHE.

grass, looked as though it had had a night out. I went to the bathroom, and then the sun rose and gleamed redly through the whiteness. And it gleamed and turned from red to gold and from gold to silver, and quickened and sprang into life, and glowed and burnt and threw out level rays of heat upon the mist. And the mist, instead of evaporating slowly, seemed to solidify and build itself up into great banks and mountains of cloud, which rolled and swept and rolled away along the valley and lost themselves in space. And the beauty of the world stood forth revealed, and the sun shone upon millions of mist-drops which lay sparkling upon tree and bush and flower and grass.

When I was dressed I looked across at the Old Hall Farm and the two fir trees, and shook my fist at them. And I chuckled and chortled from sheer joy. "I don't care a fig what you think of me," I cried. "I am going away for three whole weeks; so there! I don't care a button about you!" Then I read my Scripture portion, and went down and devoured two eggs and a rasher of bacon.

Mother waved to me from the gate as I and my trunk containing the new gown climbed on to the box seat of the 'bus (which runs daily between Heatherland and Birkenhead) by Jerry the driver, and Sammy flapped a red handkerchief at me as we spanked along past the grassy dell and apple-trees at the further end of the garden.

We always spank at first—the horses are fresh,

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

and the guard—Billy Rutter—aged twelve, blows a horn as big as himself; but by the time we have mounted our third hill, the horses—which are really very weedy rats, though I shouldn't like to say so to Jerry—are blowing like bassoons. We picked up two or three passengers—mostly market women—on Heatherland Hill, a business man in a bowler hat—not one of “the families”—by the old mill, and two more at Barnston. But our load was not heavy, and it was not necessary to get off and push the 'bus up the last hill, as is sometimes our custom.

It was pleasant swinging through the still, leafy lanes, with the scent of early autumn—one of the most delicious scents in the world—greeting our nostrils on every side; with beech-nuts and acorns patterning like raindrops on to the moist ground, and little yellow birch leaves fluttering through the air; with scarlet-berried briony, and flaming hips and haws, and crimson-leaved brambles and shining blackberries, and a tangle of traveller's joy peeping at you from every hedgerow.

I thought of Aunt Menelophe's remark, “We live beneath a heavy pall of smoke.” Should I see a tree in the Potteries? Not that I should have cared if it had been treeless and grassless and flowerless within a ten miles' radius. I always lived with these things, and to be without them for three weeks would be a change. If Aunt Menelophe had suggested my visiting her in the Sahara Desert, I should have assented with avidity. I was just

A VISIT TO AUNT MENELOPHE.

in the mood to go away. Two years had elapsed since I had stepped from home. I knew the look of every stick and stone on the place. If one of Elizabeth's saucepan lids had been on the nail where the potato-masher usually hangs, I should have noticed it. It was time I got away for a bit. I was becoming groovy, and, above all, I wanted to avoid the possibility of meeting a large, extremely disagreeable man, till I felt less bad about him.

The dog-cart met me at Blongton Station. It has lovely yellow wheels and is as high as a house. The coachman touched his hat to me as though I had been an empress. I reflected that Sammy never touched his hat to anybody, and that I must speak to him about it on my return. I don't know how my trunk was conveyed to the house, but I found it waiting in my room all unstrapped as though it had been there for years.

Aunt Menelophe met me at the door, and taking my two hands in hers, kissed me on both cheeks. Then she led me beneath the light, and studied me carefully and critically. I wriggled a bit under this long scrutiny. I felt as an insect must feel beneath a microscope, and longed to get away from the vicinity of James the butler, who was pretending not to look, but was all the time peeping at me through a mirror.

“You'll do,” said Aunt Menelophe at last. “Your eyes are exquisite—I never saw such a colour—seem to have caught up all the blue of sky and sea, and forget-me-nots and harebells, and sapphires and—”

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

“Blue-bottles.” I am almost certain I heard James mutter, and I drew quickly away from aunt’s grasp. I turned and looked at him searchingly, but his face was as the face of the Sphinx.

“Yes, your eyes are wonderful and your skin is perfect, but your hat’s a fright—a perfect fright, my dear child; let me implore of you to hide it away in your trunk and never wear it again in my presence. It makes me positively ill.”

I giggled from pure enjoyment. I began to like Aunt Menelophe tremendously.

“I am sorry, Aunt Menelophe,” I said gravely, “but I have only one other hat, which is my best one, for calls and Sundays; and I couldn’t think of wearing it every d——”

“Very well, then,” interrupted Aunt Menelophe, “we will buy another to-morrow. I couldn’t live with that atrocity. Now come in to tea.”

She led the way to a room bright with firelight, and warm with lovely colours on walls and floor and furniture. An oak bookcase ran the entire length of the room, and the pictures were all soft red pastels and beautiful sepias.

She handed me tea in the daintiest of Crown Derby cups, remarking I must want it badly. “Tea is a woman’s greatest solace,” said she. “I am convinced one of the most completely satisfying things in life is a freshly-made cup of tea—China and Ceylon in equal proportions—with plenty of good cream, taken at four o’clock in the afternoon, in a

A VISIT TO AUNT MENELOPHE.

comfortable chair, before a bright fire. But perhaps you are too young to appreciate luxuries. At your age I didn't want luxuries. I only wanted young men, pretty frocks, and plenty of dancing. They were necessities, not luxuries. Now I like well-cooked food, freshly-made tea, a warm, comfortable bed with good springs, a bright fire, well-trained servants" (I thought of James), "a good novel, and a young, interesting person with whom to talk when I am so disposed. I believe I could talk to *you*, as you appear to be a good listener."

I smiled vacuously, and reflected that so far I had not had an opportunity of being anything else. Aunt Menelophe pounced on my thought immediately.

"*You* shall talk to-morrow," said she. "I never talk in a morning, or up till four o'clock. I am too depressed. I only exist. But as soon as ever I have had *one* cup of tea I begin to live."

"Why not have it for breakfast, then?" I queried.

"No," she said quickly. "Don't suggest such a thing. Coffee is the correct drink for breakfast. I couldn't think of altering it at my time of life. But what was I saying? I was talking of luxuries and comfort, wasn't I? I never go out now. I gave up society when I became a looker-on and ceased to be admired. Women become lookers-on when they have turned forty. As soon as a woman—who has once been beautiful—becomes conscious of wrinkles, and wants to sit with her back to the light, she is better at home, and much happier. There is no

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

occasion for her then to worry about getting stout, or her complexion going, or crow's-feet coming. Her children don't notice these things, and if her husband does he is too wise to say so."

She paused to give me some more tea and hot toast. I sat and gasped quietly. Never had I heard such sentiments. I pictured mother and Angela discussing pickled walnuts at home. How infinitely more interesting were the delightful things Aunt Menelophe was saying ! I had never enjoyed myself so much in my life. And what a beautiful person she was with her white hair piled high on her head, and her dark eyes, and the lovely old lace on her soft, grey gown, and her pinky cheeks. I wanted to get up and hug her, but I thought she might not like it, as I had only known her about three-quarters of an hour. I lay back in the deep arm-chair, which was drawn up by the bright little wood fire, and absorbed the beauty of the room. Had money only achieved it, or was it the result of good taste ? I reflected there must be an inch at least of padding beneath the thick Turkey carpet to give one such a sensation as I had experienced in walking over it. It had felt like compressed moss, one foot in depth. I thought of the worn Brussels at home, covered over with faded patches of magenta roses ; and our mottled marble mantelpieces all got up and hit me in the face as I marvelled at the carving of the old oak mantelshelf in front of me. I noted the form and colour of the

A VISIT TO AUNT MENELOPHE.

old blue bowls and pots, and the richness of the big copper candlesticks and three-handled jars. Where were the bronze horses and spill pots, and candelabra and glass lustres, and Parian jugs? Perhaps I should find some of them later on in the drawing-room. I should feel lonely without a Parian jug, and should almost forget what a white bunch of grapes set about with white roses would look like. And where was the vast mahogany sideboard, with its gorgeous, shiny mirror? Surely this quaint, fantastic, carven oak sort of dresser arrangement was not supposed to be a sideboard. Why, proper, well-conducted, heavy, important, made-to-last-a-century-sideboards would blush to be in the company of such an impostor! I gave a little sigh as I looked at the delicious, soft, plain, rich blue walls around me and thought of the crimson and pink and gold flowery papers at home, and felt very depressed. Then I gave myself a big mental shake.

“Hazel Wycherley, you are a cad, a low-down cad!” I said. “Here the very best and kindest and most unselfish mother in the world allows you to come and stay with Aunt Menelophe, and gives you all the money out of the ‘sundries box’ for a new evening frock, which money she had been saving for weeks towards having the drawing-room chairs and couch re-covered—the rose-red damask of same being faded almost white—and you just sit and grumble, and moan and pity yourself, because your home is plain and ordinary and comfortable, and

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

doesn't run to velvet-piled carpets and blue bowls. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, and you want a good beating."

I felt that I must go straightway upstairs to my room and write and tell mother that she was the very sweetest and best mother an ungrateful, selfish girl ever possessed, and sprang to my feet, when—

"Of whom are you thinking so earnestly, Hazel?" said Aunt Menelophe, taking my hand; "and where are you going? Your face has been as grave as a judge's for the last five minutes, and you are very like your father. You sat there with your eyes fixed on the fire, and I could see all your thoughts chasing each other across your face. And then up you jumped—just in the old impulsive way of John Wycherley—bent upon doing something straightway at the moment. What was it?"

"I was going up to write to mother," I said awkwardly. "Do you remember mother, Aunt Menelophe?" I added with a jerk.

"Yes," said Aunt Menelophe. "She was a singularly honourable woman, and very unselfish. She might have possessed other virtues and vices, but her honesty was so pronounced that it dwarfed everything else in her character, and she believed that it was right to give the tenth part of her income to the poor. Does she still believe it?"

"Yes," I said, "and does it, and the poor are not in the least grateful."

"They never are," pronounced Aunt Menelophe

A VISIT TO AUNT MENELOPHE.

emphatically. "They are a lying, drinking, ungrateful, thriftless set of impostors, who are educated free, hospitalised free, vaccinated free; who have no rates and taxes to pay, no income tax, no appearances to keep up, and who spend—I have forgotten how much they spend, but I know it's something colossal —per head per year on drink. And not a thing, not a single thing is done for the poor little hard-working governess, who for her old age has the workhouse staring her in the face, or—or for delicate, decayed gentlewomen, who through no fault of their own—owing to their numerical superiority over men—have not married; or——"

Aunt Menelophe stopped for breath, and I broke in—

"Aunt Menelophe, what you are saying is quite wrong and out of date. I am a great Liberal of John Bright's and Gladstone's following, and a Free Trader." (I swelled with pride, though I didn't know what it meant. Father had told me I must be one, and I always intended obeying him.) "*Reform* and *Progress* are our two great watchwords. I cannot agree with what you say. Help the poor little governess, but do not do less for the working-man. The working-man is the backbone of our great empire, and he must be fed and educated and physicked."

I sat down, and felt that if I had been a man I should have been a great politician and probably an orator; and all Aunt Menelophe did was to break into fits of laughter.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"Child," she cried, "you *are* an oddity!" Then she went off into more fits, and I was just trying to decide whether I would be annoyed or pleased, when a young, stoopy man walked into the room and crossed to the bookcase without seeing me. Aunt Menelophe, still chuckling, said, "Hazel, this is your Cousin Butterby. Butterby, come and speak to your step-cousin, Miss Hazel Wycherley, who is a great Liberal and Free Trader."

Butterby came very close to me, and peered into my face as though he half expected to find a new kind of moth. He wears glasses, and his hair is endy.

"How do you do?" said he.

And when I had given him the desired information he stood first on one foot and then on the other, and looked exceedingly unhappy. Then an inspiration came.

"Are you interested in entomology, or have you any special hobby?"

"Yes," I replied gravely; "I am fond of crochet work, and have made a lot of antimacassars."

He regarded me thoughtfully for a moment, and then with a sigh left the room.

"Poor Butterby," said Aunt Menelophe; "he is very eccentric, but has a good heart. I never could understand how he came to be my child."

And she, too, sighed heavily, and then sent me to my room, where I wrote a letter to mother four pages long.

CHAPTER VII.

I RECEIVE A LETTER FROM MOTHER AND SOME GOOD ADVICE ON DRESS FROM AUNT MENELOPHE.

I HAVE been here a fortnight, and the days have simply flown. Aunt Menelophe is a perfect pet. And the old house—with its rambling corridors and wide stone staircase and twenty-two bedrooms—is simply delightful. And when you are in the large old garden and shady avenue it is hard to believe you are within a stone's-throw of the Potteries.

With the Potteries I have fallen in love. They are ugly and smoky and filthy, but they fascinate me. When the gentle hand of night has cast a darkness over "the five towns" and covered up the squalor, I love to gaze at the lurid, bright eyes of the furnaces. They seem to gleam and wink at you from the darkness, and make you think of the infernal regions and Mephistopheles and the river Styx, and all sorts of shudderingly awful things. And I shiver over the poor man who was accidentally shut up in one of the big ovens and baked with the china.

Aunt Menelophe and I go somewhere every day in the carriage. We have "done" Trentham and

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

Ingestre, which are lovely ; and one day we went to Rudyard Lake. I feel tremendously braced-up by the change, and regard with equanimity the meeting of *that* man.

I had a letter from mother this morning. They are having an autumn cleaning, and have seen Mr. Inderwick twice. They called on him the day after I left. Personally I think it is a little forward for two women—one a widow and the other a spinster—to go calling on a bachelor; and at least they might have waited till my return—not that I should have thought of calling with them, but, well, I should have been there to look after the house, and restrict the servants in their gossiping. Mother says—

“ We were pleased to have your long, interesting letter, in which you made two spelling mistakes. *Walnut* is spelt with one l and *parallel* with two. Your composition is so good that it seems a pity you cannot overcome your weakness in spelling.

“ We have seized the opportunity during your absence to have the autumn cleaning done. Sammy, Rose, Elizabeth and old Williams are engaged in shaking the carpets, and I got in a barrel of beer for the occasion. Williams is such an excellent worker, that though I greatly disapprove of his craving for beer, I am obliged to yield to it, otherwise I know he would not beat properly.

“ The pickled walnuts have turned out well. Angela is now engaged on eschalots, and when they are finished she will begin the cauliflowers and gherkins.

SOME GOOD ADVICE ON DRESS.

“She insists upon all the cornices and picture-rails being lightly washed over with vinegar to-morrow, which I think is a little unnecessary as they were done so recently. But she says there will be fly-marks upon them, and she may be right.

“It appears somewhat unseemly to me that your Aunt Menelophe should not wear caps at her time of life. I began them ten years ago, and she is twelve years my senior. However, she was always rather *cutré* in her style of dressing her hair. She would not part it down the middle, neither would she wear a comb, which I remember was much commented upon.

“My accounts have been worrying me a little. Some new sort of tax paper has come in. The money will go to the schools. I do not grudge it at all; but it is difficult to know under which column in the debit account to place it; it also means another tin box to be kept, and the lock-up drawer is already full to bursting-point.

“Your sister and I called upon Mr. Inderwick yesterday. We had heard that Mrs. Oates and several of the residents intended doing so this week, so Angela said we would be first in the field. Why I don't know; but she seemed to wish it, so I consented. I wore my new winter bonnet, which was inclined to slip a little to the back of my head, giving me a somewhat jaunty air, so I must have the shape altered. Although it had struck four o'clock when we called, the maidservant was not dressed, which we thought disgraceful. She had on her dirty, coarse apron and print dress and no cap, and I reflected upon Rose's appearance with pleasure. When we

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

asked if Mr. Inderwick were at home she hesitated for a moment, and then led us to a bare room—I mean it contained very little furniture—where Mr. Inderwick stood in his shirt-sleeves putting up a bookcase. He did not seem in the least disconcerted, which I thought showed good breeding, and he gave us a very kind welcome. After asking us to sit down, and not observing there were no chairs upon which to sit, he asked me what I thought of his new bookcase. Privately I thought it was extremely ugly; it was so high and ran round the entire room, so I said it appeared commodious. He laughed and said it was made of solid oak. He appeared very proud of it, and kept forgetting we were there. When we made a move to go he said we must have some tea, and when we declined and said we were afraid our call had been a little premature, he said 'nonsense' in such a loud tone that it quite startled us. He took us to another room, where presently an old woman—Mrs. Egerton—brought in tea. She seemed a respectable sort of person. He forgot to give me any cream and Angela sugar, and when we passed up our cups he gave me the sugar and Angela the cream, but we did not like to draw his attention to the fact. Just as we were leaving he suddenly said, 'Where is Miss Hazel?' and when I told him he asked how long you would be away. Angela says she doesn't think it's good form to ask such abrupt questions. But probably he has lived a good deal alone, and so missed the refining influence of women. He has a cultured voice and a singularly fine appearance, but his manners are not polished. He sat for quite half an hour in his shirt-sleeves, and then

SOME GOOD ADVICE ON DRESS.

when he became cognisant of this I will give him credit that he seemed quite overcome and hastened out of the room for his coat, which had a big paint-mark on the sleeve. He said he hoped to have the pleasure of returning our call at an early date. Perhaps you will be at home then. It seems funny you should have not yet met, when you were such friends some years ago. Angela desires her love, and

“I remain

“YOUR AFFECTIONATE MOTHER.”

I went down to breakfast feeling thoroughly annoyed. If the rest of Heatherland should gush and run after this man, why should mother and Angela do the same?

“What is the matter?” said Aunt Menelophe.

She has the eye of a hawk and the discernment of a judge.

“Nothing,” I replied.

“You don’t lie well,” said she. “People with blue eyes are rarely good fibbers. Have some coffee, and then tell me all about it.”

And I told her. And what I kept back she found out by ferreting.

“You acted like a little fool,” said she.

“Yes,” I replied. “Rub it in.”

She laughed.

“Poor little girl,” and she laid her hand on mine. “But don’t attach too much importance to it. Go back and be natural, and speak to him the next time

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

you meet. If he be a decent man—he sounds nice—he won't let you feel that he once saw you at a disadvantage, and the inside of your character instead of your out." (I winced.) "Men are really very chivalrous to women. I often wonder how they put up with our petty ways," and she sighed.

"I have never known any men," I remarked; "only father and Sammy and Frederick Moss."

"No," said she, "so I should imagine."

"What do you think of them?" I ventured.

"As a class," said Aunt Menelophe, "men are better than women, with larger minds and more generous instincts. But women are decidedly more interesting."

I opened my mouth wide at such a proposition.

"Women more interesting?"

"Yes," said my aunt, "a woman is the most interesting, complex, unexpected sort of creature God has created. She has a weakish body, an intellect not too brilliant, sound judgment, a great capacity for imbibing"—I giggled, and Aunt Menelophe fixed me sternly—"I mean great receptive powers, no constructive ability, a character with one hundred and fifty sides to it, and her moods and whims are beyond counting, for they are legion."

"I see," I remarked meekly, and handed some bacon to Butterby, who was peering round the table for jam. And he ate it in a dream, making his third helping.

SOME GOOD ADVICE ON DRESS.

“What do *you* think of women, Butterby?” I asked.

“Eh? I? Why I think women are mostly fools,” he said, with the greatest show of promptitude I have yet seen him display. And he then returned to the insect book he was reading.

I don’t think I care overmuch for Butterby, and Dick I have scarcely seen. He is engaged. His *fiancée* is sweetly pretty and amiable, and her voice is so gentle that when she speaks you feel as though you were in church. They are a very devoted couple, and Aunt Menelophe says she is the type of woman who will have fifteen children and sob her eyes out the first evening her husband is late home.

Aunt Menelophe is quite the nicest and cleverest and most beautiful of the lot. She has a sharp tongue, which only conceals the kindest, biggest heart. She is always helping “lame dogs over stiles,” and has given me the loveliest pale blue, soft beaver hat, with a glorious long black feather, and a creamy, fluffy, silk tea-gown. I picture myself floating round Heatherland in a tea-gown, and chuckle. The entire parish would climb on front seats to stare at me, and Angela would have a fit on the spot. Aunt Menelophe says I should live in blue. She tells me this quite once a day.

“Dress to the colour of your eyes and hair,” said she, when I was trying on the hat at Rookfield’s in Stafford. “It is a safe rule to go by. You look dreadful in that pink.”

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

It was the shrimpy frock.

“I see. And as my eyes are blue and my hair is nearly black, I suppose a blue and black check would do for my new winter costume—a nice big check?” said I.

Aunt Menelophe simply snorted.

“Checks were an invention—not of the devil—but of some grasping, economical cloth manufacturer who wanted to use up his odds and ends of wool. He should have been strung up. Imagine a woman in ancient Greece wearing a check chess-board robe with a girdle round it! And people say we have progressed! No, never wear checks if you desire to be known as a well-dressed woman. Cultivate flowing lines, simplicity in form, and really good colours. Don’t *heap* things on your person; don’t look like an escaped bazaar. When I see women dangling chains and trinkets, and chatelains and ribbons and velvets; and dabbing rosettes and bows and ruchings on every spare place, I yearn to pluck them as you would a fowl. And when you get to my age wear soft tones of grey. Grey blends and harmonizes with faded faces and eyes. It softens the lines and gives an effect of mellowness. Whatever women may say to you, don’t pass your entire existence in black. Black should be an elderly woman’s bugbear. It accentuates wrinkles and sallowness and flabby chins. It shows up sunken cheeks and knobbly jaw-bones, and forms a striking background for the stout chin of the three-decker character.

SOME GOOD ADVICE ON DRESS.

But put her in soft mauves and greys with rich, old, champagne-coloured lace at her throat, and you will forget she is old. Her younger women friends will be bound to say she dresses in much too juvenile a style and is aping to be young. There has scarcely been a woman in this world who has not said that some other woman dresses too young. It is a way she has."

Then Aunt Menelophe floated in an atmosphere of soft, grey cloth and chinchilla and velvet, crowned by her lovely grey hair to the waiting cab, and as she said, "The station, driver," I felt proud to belong to her.

"What a time it must have taken you to learn all this, Aunt Menelophe!" I remarked.

"Yes," she replied, with a little sigh, "it has. I am sixty-five. And the trouble is that just as your accumulated experience and knowledge are becoming useful to you, somebody comes along and measures you for your coffin. Then there is a funeral, flowers on your grave for about five anniversaries, and then you are forgotten. Let me see, I didn't show you Stafford, did I? But there is nothing to show. Stafford is noted for boots, and you wouldn't want to see boots, would you? And I fancy Isaac Walton did something here once, but I can't remember what it was till we have had some tea. I ordered tea to be ready at the works; at least, I told Butterby to order it. I arranged with a confectioner always to send in tea to the office when I am there.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

You see," she went on, "Butterby is supposed to explain things to visitors, but he never does. In fact, he generally wanders off when we are about half-way through, and so *I* have to instruct them in the making of china, and *must* have tea to brace me up. What I don't know about the manufacture I make up, and it's most interesting to see their faces. The women always sigh over the dippers. They think it is the right and humane thing to do. They have read somewhere that a dipper's work is unhealthy and dangerous, and even shortens life; and they always seem to be under the impression that a dipper will turn into a corpse before their eyes. They say sympathetic things and talk of the dangers of glass-blowing and match-making all in the same breath. And when I say, 'My dear ladies, if they die it is generally their own faults, through not observing the precautions laid down for them,' they think I am very heartless and a brute. Really, I am awfully sorry for some of the working people of England—not so much for the men as for the women. What a grind some of the women have! One round of babies and incessant hard work which *never* ends. A man comes in at the end of the day; he is tired, but his work is finished. The wife is tired, too, only more so; but she is not finished, and never will be. No wonder women take to drink. I should too—I should soak in it!"

As Aunt Menelophe gives vent to this awful statement her face is wrinkled up in the kindest,

SOME GOOD ADVICE ON DRESS.

sweetest smile imaginable, and one could picture her doing many kind deeds for those women and babies.

“Dear me,” she cried as we were driving from the station to the works, “we nearly ran over Butterby. That boy gives me such shocks. He caused me to break one of the old Wedgwood cups one day by suddenly grabbing at my arm with great violence, because he imagined there was some sort of rare butterfly seated on my sleeve. It turned out to be a bit of silk. I was very angry, and ordered some stronger glasses for him. I wonder what he is doing loitering in the road? Probably in search of some insect. And I told him we should be there at four. Perhaps he has been called out on some special business, and will turn up later.”

“He did not look like business,” I ventured.

“No,” snapped Aunt Menelophe, “he looked like a tramp who is afraid he may find work.” Then she closed her lips tightly and stared at the landscape, which consisted of chimneys, furnaces, and dirt.

When we arrived at the works there was no Butterby and no tea. I looked fearfully at Aunt Menelophe, and at the sight of her the small clerk in the office shrivelled up.

“Stop the cab,” she said with composure, and the clerk and I collided with violence at the door and yelled “Hi!” The cab “hied,” and we drove home.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"I will try and get up sufficient energy to attack them another day," she said when we were seated in the morning-room waiting for tea. "In the meantime I will lend you a book on the manufacture of Staffordshire china, and Josiah Wedgwood. It will teach you a good deal, and should we never get to the works it won't matter so much. I never talked so much in my life before four o'clock, and I am perfectly exhausted." Then she fell back in her armchair and lay with closed eyes till James appeared with the tea.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DINNER PARTY, FOLLOWED BY MY SEEING THE GHOST.

LAST evening Aunt Menelophe gave a dinner party, and at two o'clock in the morning I saw the ghost. One on the top of the other was too much for me, for I felt a perfect wreck when I woke, and had great black rings under my eyes. When Parkins brought me my tea I asked her for some soda-water instead. She seemed very surprised, and I said—

“Parkins, *you* would want soda-water if you had a thirst like mine. My mouth feels like a sawdust bin.”

At breakfast, after we had finished discussing the ghost and the dinner, I remarked, tentatively, that I had felt very plain the previous evening, and that I did not think the new gown suited me. I looked interrogatively at Aunt Menelophe.

“You look plainer this morning,” she said.

It was not what I had expected, and I felt annoyed. How could anyone look their best after such an awful night and such a shock to the system?

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"You had better go to your room and lie down," Aunt Menelophe remarked after lunch, "and I will send up your tea."

I accepted with alacrity. I have had a most delicious sleep, and feel ready for anything. I have a cosy fire, and am seated in a low chair in my new tea-gown, and feel exactly like a heroine in a novel. I look scornfully at my old, red dressing-gown hanging up behind the door; I note with disdain its embroidered, old-fashioned, scalloped frills. I scalloped them myself and used a penny to draw out the design, and spent the last of my pocket-money on silk for the button-holing. *Now* I don't like scallops. I prefer soft, fluffety, chiffon frills billowing up all round my neck, and an empire train. I am tired of old-fashioned, made-to-wear-for-ever clothes.

To-morrow I am going home, and must wear my old, brown, stuff dress once more. I can quite see it will never wear out, so one day I shall upset a bottle of ink down it, and not let mother and Angela see it till it is dry. It will be then too late for Angela to get out the stain with milk, so it will be consigned to the rag-bag.

I feel in the mood to-day to marry a prince. Why can't I meet a Russian prince, like a girl in a novel, who will shower sables, and white cloth gowns trimmed with ermine, and diamonds upon me? Perhaps I am not innocent or religious enough. I couldn't sit for hours with large, blue,

A DINNER PARTY.

dreamy eyes, or kneel before a little altar in my bedroom, or babble to the night at my open window. And I couldn't be always blushing. It must be so trying for a "wave of scarlet to mantle your cheek and brow" on the slightest provocation, and for your bosom to keep heaving and your eyes flashing. No, I am afraid a Russian prince wouldn't care about me.

A man last night seemed a little interested in me, but I felt a little nervous of him, for some reason; and of course we shall never meet again. He is only visiting down here. He lives in London, and London is not a place I haunt.

But I must begin at the beginning. The dinner was gorgeous. I have forgotten how many courses, but they all seemed to be served topsy-turvy, and in the order the servants liked. For instance, we had hot shrimps rolled up in white paper *after* the sweets, which seemed funny. Anchovies at one end of the dinner and shrimps at the other! Perhaps Aunt Menelophe thought they would fight inside if they were served too near together.

The flowers were exquisite, and lovely scarlet Virginian creeper leaves floated about in the finger bowls, and long sprays of it crawled about the table and kept getting mixed up in things. I saw a man drinking claret with a spray hanging from his moustache. It was so funny the way he dashed it from him, as though he were very angry with it. The finger bowls were solid silver, and silver cupids with chubby faces held the chrysanthemums.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

The man who took me in to dinner rather alarmed me at first, but I presently found he was much more interested in his food than in me, and he snored heavily as he ate. I began to feel a little annoyed, but perhaps it was my fault. I noticed all the other women were chattering away like jays and sending forth peals of laughter, and the men were guffawing. Why didn't my man guffaw? I racked my brains for something to say, but nothing came. I could only think of idiotic questions, such as: "Do you like grouse? Are you fond of Dickens? Are you married? Do you belong to the Church of England?" None of them seemed suitable, and all much too familiar to put to a perfect stranger.

Presently I saw Aunt Menelophe's eye upon me. I could see she thought me dull. I felt desperate.

"Do you shoot?" I flung it at him suddenly, and he started.

"Eh, what's that you say?" and he put down his knife and fork.

"Do you shoot?" I repeated in a louder voice.

"Do what?" and he inclined his right ear to me.

"He's deaf," the man on my right whispered.

"Do you shoot?" I shouted at the top of my voice, my cheeks scarlet, and conscious that the whole table was listening.

"Shoot what?" said this great, deaf, prize idiot. I heard a titter.

A DINNER PARTY.

“Cats!” I said with sudden, deadly calmness, and there was a roar of laughter.

“Ha ! ”

He had heard at last, and was very pleased with himself, and wasn’t going to let the subject drop. He was also a little mystified. He was a detective kind of man, a man who runs things to earth, and I would willingly have sent a shot through *him*.

“Do I shoot cats ? ” said he. “Why, what sort of cats ? ”

“Manx,” I said with illumination.

I felt he must be humoured. Then he appeared to think I had said something extremely funny, and went off into fits of laughter, and laughed and spluttered till he choked.

Why had Aunt Menelophe sent me in with such a creature? And the man to my right looked so interesting. I gave a little sigh, and turning to glance at him, our eyes met. He smiled, and showed the whitest set of teeth imaginable.

“It’s awfully trying, shouting at a person before a whole dinner-table,” said he sympathetically.

“Yes,” I replied, still feeling hot, “I never felt such a fool in my life. I am sorry for deaf people, but they are *so* persistent.”

Then he turned half his back on his partner, and I turned the whole of mine on mine—which was rude of me, but pardonable, I thought, under the circumstances—and we fell to talking. I fancy he enjoyed *himself*, and I think I must have enjoyed

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

myself, for I became oblivious to my surroundings, till unexpectedly he struck a jarring note. He had been talking of art, of music, of literature, of science —of a thousand and one things of which I had never even heard, and of which he appeared to think I knew as much as he. I hate to assume a knowledge of a subject—for one thing, you never know when you will be found out; for another, it doesn't seem above-board, and Aunt Menelophe says women are *so* deceitful—so suddenly I observed: “I am afraid I don't understand or appreciate half of what you are saying, though I am vastly interested. But I am woefully ignorant. I was educated at home by a governess, and I have lived in a village, with women, the whole of my life.”

It was a relief to get it out, and he laughed softly and said, “How delightfully refreshing to meet such candour! My instinct has not played me false; I knew you were a little country girl when you were so upset by your partner's deafness. You became so flushed and agitated that I said to myself, ‘This girl is from the country; she is fresh and worth cultivating,’”

I felt piqued and annoyed. So he had been drawing me out! He had been enjoying my *gaucheries*! He had been sounding the depths of my ignorance!

“And so you have been cultivating me? You have cast the pearls of your wisdom at the feet of a ‘little country girl!’ How extremely kind of you!

A DINNER PARTY.

I feel like Esther must have felt when the sceptre was extended to her, and am indeed grateful."

I laughed, but try as I would I could not keep a note of hurt anger from my voice, and when Aunt Menelophe rose at that moment I fairly bolted from the room.

When the men joined us later he walked across the room negligently, and dropped into a seat beside me.

"That was a nasty cut," he said. "I don't think I deserved it."

"Don't you?" I replied, beginning to bristle. "Well, put it down to the want of discrimination on the part of a village miss."

"I am very sorry if I have offended you by what I said. I did not mean to be patronising. I always say exactly what I think, and you struck me as being quite the freshest and most straightforward girl I had met for many a long month. It did not seem to me a breach of good manners to tell you so."

I felt somewhat mollified.

"But I am not straightforward."

"Well, nobody is," he said reassuringly.

"Yes, mother is," I said quickly; and then I could have bitten my tongue out, for he began to laugh again gently.

"Who is mother?" he asked.

"Look here," I replied, my temper again rising, "if we are to continue our conversation please do

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

not laugh at every word I utter in that quizzical, amused sort of way. Perhaps you do not mean it as such, perhaps I am unduly sensitive, but all the time I feel you are making fun of me, and I don't like it."

He sat up, and became grave at once.

"I am sorry," he said gently. "I have no desire to make fun of you. You must be very sensitive, as you say. We have only known each other three-quarters of an hour, and have already had two quarrels or misunderstandings. I am not usually considered pugilistic, and so——"

"And so it must be my fault," I interrupted. "Well, I won't be touchy any more, and you can stay and talk to me if you like."

"Thanks," he said dryly, and then we both laughed.

He wasn't in the least patronising again, and I told him all about Heatherland and mother, and Angela and Sammy, in all of which he expressed himself greatly interested. But I could not get away from the impression that he was weighing me up and drawing me out and examining me as Butterby does his moths. I was rather glad when the evening was over. He never once left my side, and I wasn't brave enough to get up and deliberately walk away, for he seemed to fascinate me.

"Well!" said Aunt Menelophe, when she came to my room to bid me good-night, "you have made a conquest."

A DINNER PARTY.

“Do you mean the deaf man?” I asked.

“No,” she replied, “I don’t. You were extremely rude to him. I mean Mr. Escourt, who is supposed to be brilliantly clever—a great literary light. Writes something on everything. Essayist, reviewer, leader - writer, and novelist, I believe. Lives in London. A great friend of my son Wellesley. Unmarried, a professed woman-hater, and £5,000 a year. He is useful at parties, but *I* don’t much care for him.”

“And *I* don’t like him,” I agreed.

“How do you behave, then, to a man you do like? I merely ask from a spirit of curiosity. I observed you talked to Mr. Escourt the entire evening,” said Aunt Menelophe.

“Aunt Menelophe,” I replied, “you are frequently untruthful, and not exercising a good influence over me. Good-night.”

“Good-night,” said she, and went out of the room laughing.

I was tired and excited, and was a long, long time in getting off to sleep. My feet were cold and my head was hot. I went through each course of the dinner and every item of Mr. Escourt’s conversation. How well he had talked! And did he not say Poe’s *The Whirlpool* was the most emotional thing that had ever been written, or did he say realistic? Perhaps it was *Lockesley Hall* he described as being strongly emotional. What a pity to have forgotten. But what did it matter? I was too tired, and

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

sleep—— “Why, it was *Jack and the Beanstalk*,” came a voice.

I started, and there were the lobster-salad and ice-pudding walking down the room hand-in-hand.

“He didn’t,” I contradicted, feeling annoyed.

“He did! he did! he did!” they shouted.

Then the shrimps began to untie themselves from the paper; and the cheese straws, with pink ribbon sashes round their waists, capered about wildly; and the grouse began to jump over chairs; and champagne bottles, dressed in white serviettes, waltzed round the room with the sherries and ports. And then they all joined hands and, bowing, cried, “We will now sit upon Miss Hazel Wycherley’s chest,” and before I could move they climbed on to the bed and swarmed over me and pressed me flat—flatter and flatter. I gasped, I tried to shriek out, I panted, I laboured for breath, I was suffocating, I rolled in agony, I was dying. And then, with one terrific effort, I pushed and heaved, and shoved and strained, and—woke up. I was clutching the pillows frantically, my forehead was wet, I felt as though I had just emerged from a big prize-fight, when—horror upon horror!—something *was* in the room. I sat up in bed wildly straining into the darkness. Something moved! A scream froze on my lips, my breath came thickly, my heart stopped. It was the ghost! Something hammered in my brain, “It’s the toad! it’s the toad!” God! how could I bear the horror of it? Was I dreaming?

A DINNER PARTY.

Was I mad? It moved nearer and nearer and nearer. It touched the bed. Slowly it worked up towards me, clawing the air; and, with one frenzied yell, I rose up in bed and grabbed—something by the nose

“Damn it!” came a voice; “what the devil are you doing, Hazel? Let go.” For I was holding on like grim death to some struggling creature.

“Oh, Butterby!” I sobbed, “is it you? You are sure you are not a toad. You are quite sure you are not the toad. Oh, dear Butterby! say you won’t turn into a toad and spit at me? I couldn’t bear it. Oh! oh! oh! I was never so terrified in my life. Oh, Butterby! how could you? It was cruel of you. It was wicked. The shock has nearly killed me. I can feel my hair turning snow-white. Oh, Butterby, the horror of it! How could you? How could you?” I was sobbing bitterly, and great tears were splashing on to the bed.

Butterby did not reply for a moment. I could feel he was rubbing his injured member, and I cheered up a little. I must have hurt him badly.

At last he spoke.

“Look here, Hazel, I am beastly sorry. I never meant to frighten you. I completely forgot you were sleeping here. It is years since this room was occupied. I keep some entomological books in the top drawer of the chest of drawers.” (This was true, for I had seen them.) “The bookcase in the

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

library is overflowing, so I stuck them here, as I have no room in my quarters. Do you see?"

"Yes," I replied injuredly. "But I can't see what that has to do with your wandering in here in the dead of night and frightening me into blue fits, and causing me to be ill for months from shock."

He patted my arm soothingly.

"Don't cry, old girl! It was this way. I couldn't sleep. I think it was the lobster and—"

"Yes," I interrupted, "it was. My lobster wouldn't sleep either, neither would the shrimps; but I didn't wander round the house and play ghosts, and scare people to death and—"

"Wait a moment," said he; "let me finish. Well, I was sick of lying awake, and I thought I would read a bit, so I came here for one of the books; it was nearer than going downstairs. Now do you understand?"

"I hear what you say. But why didn't you bring a light with you? It is not usual to tramp about a house in the pitch dark, is it?" I enquired scathingly.

"I forgot. That's a fact. I never thought of it. There was a low light on the landing and in the corridor, and I knew the geography of the room so well that I thought I could grope my way to the chest of drawers without—"

"Instead of which you lost your bearings and groped your way to the bed and half-killed your poor step-cousin," said I, beginning to gulp again.

A DINNER PARTY.

“Now go. Some day I’ll try and forgive you, but I can’t to-night. I am too unnerved. So please go away,” and I sobbed afresh.

Butterby stood still for a moment, and then, groping his way to the door, went out without another word. I heard him fall over something in the corridor, which gave me some small satisfaction.

“Idiot!” I said. “Great idiot! I wish he would turn into an insect himself, and then I would tread on him.”

With which vindictive expression I turned over in order to seek sleep, but never was I so wide awake in my life. My brain seemed on fire and my body felt like water. Then I fell to laughing weakly as I pictured Butterby’s nose, and I went on laughing till I cried again, and then—a knock came at the door, and very feebly I said, “Come in.”

“Some new development,” I thought. “Perhaps this is the goat with two tails,” and I raised my head, feebly interested.

“It’s only I, Hazel,” and again a shadowy figure moved towards the bed. “I’ve brought you a raspberry tart,” and Butterby thrust a large, jammy lump of pastry into my hand, and then fled.

A raspberry tart when my mouth was like a limekiln! Why couldn’t he have brought a bucket of water into which I could thrust my head? I flung the tart to the other end of the room, where I heard it squelch against the wall. But it was

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

kind of Butterby, very kind. He was not such bad sort.

When I related my tragic story to Aunt Mene-lophe this morning all she remarked was—

“And you say that Butterby rapped out a ‘damn.’ I didn’t know the boy had it in him.”

And she looked as pleased as if he had just received the V.C.

CHAPTER IX.

I RETURN HOME, AND EXCHANGE SENTIMENTS WITH JERRY ON AUTUMN.

ONCE again am I enswathed in my old, workaday brown, stuff gown, an opportunity not having yet arisen in which to throw ink down the front of the skirt. The silk tea-gown has been consigned to a cupboard in the spare room, and covered up from the dust with an old nightgown.

“Perhaps you may have a long illness at some future date, and then you could wear it to receive visitors,” said mother cheerfully.

“I should cut it up into an evening dress,” suggested Angela still more cheerfully. “The chiffon frills would trim the neck of the bodice nicely.”

“It will remain a tea-gown to the end of its days,” I answered firmly.

“When will you wear it?” asked Angela.

“Angela,” I replied, “you should check that spirit of curiosity before it becomes too deeply rooted. Curiosity is not a pleasant feature in anyone’s character, and it once killed a cat. Tradition says it was *care*, but I am convinced it was *curiosity*.”

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

Then I walked out of the room with dignity, and left Angela gaping. I rarely correct my sister; in fact, I dare not. But when I do her breath comes in gasps.

Aunt Menelophe saw me off at the station yesterday afternoon. She presented me with a five-pound note, a box of chocolates, and *Ally Sloper*.

“Good-bye, little girl,” said she. “Tell your mother I return you exactly three weeks to the day, and many thanks for the loan. I wish I could keep you three months, but I am a woman of my word. You have cheered up an old woman, and *almost* made her a Free Trader and Liberal. Remember all I have told you about clothes, and wear blue. Never again put on that frightful pink. Give it to the first beggar woman you meet. Come whenever you like to the Hall. You will always find a welcome. And should you ever be in trouble bring it to me, and we’ll see what can be done with it. Value your mother. A good mother is the nearest thing to heaven, and one generally finds this out when she is gone. *Your* mother *must* be a good woman to wear such caps as you describe. Good-bye.”

Then she kissed me on both cheeks, and I choked and got into the train.

As it was slowly moving out of the station, Butterby dashed along the platform and thrust a small paper parcel into my hand.

“It’s a beetle,” he gasped. “Take very great care of it. It was the rarest beetle in my collection,

I RETURN HOME.

and is valuable. I—I'm sorry I frightened you so. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Butterby. Thanks awfully. I'm all right now," I shouted as we began to get up steam.

Aunt Menelophe waved a wisp of lace, and Butterby an exceedingly soiled handkerchief after me, and I flapped *Ally Sloper* till we turned a corner and they were lost to view.

I opened the parcel gingerly—I am a bit suspicious of entomologists, they often seem to run to live creatures—but there lay the duckiest, little bronze beetle, with heaps of legs, mounted in gold—a little lace brooch, on pink cotton wool.

How kind of Butterby! Poor old Butterby! I was growing quite fond of him. He was a dear old thing, and stupendously clever. As Aunt Menelophe said, he appeared to have every ology in his head but that of business. He had shown me his collection of moths and butterflies and insects the night before.

"Butterby," I had said, "I should open a South Kensington Museum in the Potteries, and then when the 'wakes' were on there would be something improving for the people to do. Just think what a boon your insects would be on a wet day! and how glorious for them to see a cockroach impaled on a pin!"

"That isn't a cockroach," said Butterby, following the direction of my eyes, "that is a Tiger beetle.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

You don't seem to know much about anything. Girls are very ignorant."

"Well, don't be depressed about it, dear Butterby," I replied. "Girls get on very well, and are almost as useful as—entomologists."

But he did not hear me: Butterby rarely listens to people talking.

When I arrived at Birkenhead, and made my way to Woodside and the old, familiar 'bus, I somehow felt that Jerry would touch his hat and spring forward to help me in; but he did nothing of the kind.

"Evenin' to you, Miss Hazelt," says he. "You're just 'ome in toime, for your pigs is bein' killed this week, and you wouldn't loike to 'ave missed that, I reckon. Your ma's sausages, I'm told, is the best made in 'Eatherland. Now just wait a minute, and I'll put you some clane straw in the bottom o' the 'bus."

"Thank you, Jerry," I replied; "I'm going outside."

I could see Joey Tomlinson coming along in the distance, and Joey appears to prefer a diet of onions to any other.

"Eh, but you'll be rare cold, Miss Hazelt; these nights in October 'ave a sharp bit o' frost in 'em—nips your fingers. Now you take my advoice and get insoide amongst the clane straw."

He might have been addressing one of mother's pigs, enticing it to a warm bed.

I RETURN HOME.

“No, thank you, Jerry. I shall be all right. I like these crisp nights,” I answered, climbing up to the seat beside him. He lent me some of his mackintosh apron and tucked it in well round me. Soon we had left the town behind us, and were swinging along the sweet-scented country lanes ; the horses were fresh and were going home, and the passengers few. The sky was clear, and in the fading light I could just make out the familiar landmarks—the waterworks at Prenton, the old white mill, and the distant Welsh hills.

There were no such lanes in Blongton, and I sniffed in the sweet, seductive scent of dying trees and leaves and bracken, and soft, moist earth.

“Doesn’t autumn smell lovely, Jerry?” I said. “Nearly as nice as spring, only not so hopeful.”

Jerry sniffed the air like a rabbit.

“No,” replied he, “I don’t smell anythink, only some manure yonder in the fields ‘longside o’ Prenton.”

“Jerry, you are a Philistine,” I cried. “You have no romance in you, no sense of beauty. Don’t you love the delicious scent of the yellow and red and brown leaves which are dying and rustling and falling—falling to earth ? Don’t you like the smell of the pale, yellowing bracken breathing its last amongst the brown heather and gorse and beneath the tangled, weeping hedges ? Don’t you love the scent of the fungi in the little, wet, shady woods, and the fragrance of the pine-needles as they drop

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

one by one to the ground, softer and more silent than raindrops on summer flowers asleep? Doesn't the lush moss at the foot of the trees, and the brown growth which creeps up the grey trunks, fill you with a kind of delicious sadness, which is almost akin to pain? Don't the fading and drooping autumn flowers—the dahlias and hollyhocks with their curious, subtle scent, the Michaelmas daisies and phlox—make you think of the autumn of life—the gentle sitting down and resting and dreaming after the strenuous, voluptuous life of the spring and summer? Don't they, Jerry? Don't you ever feel these things?"

Jerry remained silent for a moment and looked gravely into the gathering darkness. Then he flicked up his horses, which had fallen into a walk, and spoke.

"Nay, Miss Hazelt," he said, "oi never felt loikes what yer descriobes not wonst in my loife. If oi had oi should 'ave thought oi was drunk. Poine-needles makes me think of turpentoin—turps and goose grease is what the auld woman rubs my chest wi' in winter; dead brackin remoinds me it makes a good, dry beddin' for pigs; the droppin' leaves puts me in moind of leaf mould for the garding; dalies and 'olly'ocks makes me think of 'arvest festivals; an' autumn itself calls to moind things loike Michaelmas geese, rent day, 'duckin' apple' night, and to tell the auld woman to put an extry blanket on the bed. Oi should be roight miserable

I RETURN HOME.

if oi felt as yer descroibs at the fallin' of the year. Oi should stop insoide and take hot drinks, indade oi should and all."

"But I enjoy it, Jerry," I said gently. "I love it."

"Do yer? Ah, well," he remarked, "wimin seems to 'ave the queerest ways of enjoyin' 'emselves. When my auld woman is extry bad and down in the dumps she goes to a saint's-day sarvace. As soon as she goes to saint's-day sarvaces oi knows oi'm in fer a poor supper. She 'asn't the 'eart or strength to see after both. Oi 'ates a saint's-day sarvace more 'n oi do Sunday before Easter, which is so bloomin' long oi falls asleep all over the place," and Jerry sighed heavily and fell into thought.

It was seven o'clock and quite dark as we swung down the lane and pulled up at our front gate. I could see the lights shining through the trees and shrubs, and Sammy was on the step to receive my trunk. As I walked with him up to the house, Dibbs dashed across the lawn and spun in front of me like a merry-go-round. And mother was waiting at the door with her cap on one side, and Angela was just behind her, and Rose, trim in cap and apron, was just behind Angela, and Elizabeth was peeping through the kitchen door. After all, home was not so bad. I hugged mother, kissed Angela, shook hands with Rose, nodded to Elizabeth, and patted Dibbs, who was still behaving like a thing demented.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

The entire place smelt of soap, furniture polish, and general cleanliness. The linoleum shone and the mahogany table and chairs gleamed in the lamp-light.

"Angela," I said as I walked into the dining-room, "this is the cleanest house in Great Britain. A Dutch house might give it odds. One cannot say. But nothing in Great Britain could touch it."

"Is it cleaner than Aunt Menelophe's?" inquired my sister eagerly.

"Much," I replied with emphasis as I sat down.

"And she has five women servants and one man, you say?" continued Angela.

"Yes," said I. "And I am convinced that they never clean the picture-rod with vinegar *once* a year, let alone twice," and my eyes rested on the top of the walls.

Angela's eyes followed mine with quiet pleasure.

"Yes," she remarked with a little sigh of satisfaction, "they *do* look nice."

Presently she suggested I should take off my things, as tea was ready and the chicken would be spoilt.

"And don't spill any candle-grease on the stairs," she called after me, "as they have just been done with brown paper and an iron."

Then I became wicked. I was quite cheerful and contented till Angela mentioned the word grease and told me to *mind*. I hate being told to *mind*. I walked slowly up the stairs, and as soon as I had turned the corner I bent down and spilt one, nice,

I RETURN HOME.

fat spot of grease on a red flower in the carpet on the top stair. Then I felt happier and passed on to my room.

It looked cheerless and excessively clean. Where was the bright wood fire? Where were the soft, yellow walls and frilly, silk curtains? The fuchsias on the paper looked stiff and chilly. And why did Angela insist on having the Nottingham lace curtains starched so aggressively? They might have been wearing crinolines. I gave them a vicious prod, and they merely crackled and sprang back again. I walked to the bed and gave the stiff, staring white counterpane a tweak. Why couldn't it be soft and lacy and frilly like Aunt Menelophe's? I stared at the six prim crochet mats on the dressing-table, all matching, and exactly opposite to one another. On one rested a candlestick; on another rested a candlestick—both white china with pink bands. On a third rested a ring-stand—I have one ring. On a fourth lay a trinket-jar, also white china with a pink band. A fifth would support a small Bible, and the sixth Jeremy Taylor when I had unpacked them. I passed to the washstand. Four more crotchet mats reposed there, but these were red and white. I mixed them all up with the dressing-table mats, and chuckled as I pictured Rose sorting them out in the morning. Afterwards I opened the window, and leant out into the night. The evening was very still. Across the river, in Wales, the lights twinkled at me—as I thought—sympathetically. More lights twinkled

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

in the blue above. Then the moon rose in splendour, and sent a shimmering band of light across the waters of the Dee. The little waves turned into silver, and rippled and tumbled and laughed. And a tiny breeze came along and caught up the laugh, and carried it to the trees and leaves close to my window. And the leaves laughed too, and rustled and tumbled one over another to the soft grass below; and one little yellow one blew against my lips as though to kiss me, and I held it in my hand and stroked its damp, fading face. Bit by bit the soft stillness of the night entered my being, and a peace fell upon me.

What did it all matter? How could I care about the little worries and jars of life when I was still young and strong, and had the trees and river and hills and dear Mother Earth to love and to comfort me? And there was my own mother. There was always mother, who, when I could get her away from Angela, was the very nicest of mothers. I would—

“Hazel, are you coming?” said mother’s voice suddenly behind me.

I started.

“Yes, mother, I’m coming.”

“What were you doing?” she asked, looking at me suspiciously. “You’ve been crying.”

“No, I haven’t,” I lied. “My eyes are watering after the wind in my face.”

Then I took her arm in mine, and we walked down the stairs together. When we reached the bottom stair, I said—

I RETURN HOME.

“Mother, will you give me another kiss?” and I put my arms round her tightly.

She did so, and looked at me wonderingly.

“Aren’t you well?” she asked.

“Quite,” I replied, forcing a laugh. “So well that I feel equal to eating two whole chickens myself.”

“There is only one,” said mother practically, “Grey Legs, she was killed yesterday.”

CHAPTER X.

AN ALL-HALLOWS' E'EN PARTY.

THE last fortnight had been so chock-full of events and things happening and things about to happen, that I have decided Heatherland is not half so dull a place as I imagined. Even pig-killing day was not so sad as usual. It is generally a day I look upon with horror—a sanguinary, odious sort of day; a day upon which I efface myself as much as Angela will permit; a day upon which I stuff my fingers into my ears and fly to the most remote corner of the garden—anywhere and anything to escape those terrible screams. This time I put on my hat and jacket and rushed off to the shore. I met Bill the pig-killer in his blue coat just as I was leaving the front gate.

“Oh, Bill!” I cried, “hurt Sukey as little as possible.”

Bill has such nice feelings, considering his vocation.

“Ay, ay! Miss Hazelt,” he replied. “Sukey will feel it no more’n than if it was a fleabite. One moment she’s ‘ere and the next she’s sausages, so to speak.”

“Don’t, Bill,” I said; “I can’t bear it. Nobody

AN ALL-HALLOWS' E'EN PARTY.

knows what Sukey has been to me." And I hurried on, trying not to think or see things too vividly.

Sukey was such a nice, adaptable, happy-go-lucky sort of pig. She would eat anything that was put before her and appear to enjoy it. Once she ate up an old sponge of mine that had been thrown by accident into the sty. Another time she devoured one of Elizabeth's dish-cloths. Nothing seemed to come amiss with her. She never carpéd at life, and now—now it was to be ended.

I threw stones into the water for Dibbs, I made ducks and drakes with the little flat ones. I watched the shadows racing each other up the hills in the sunlit fields. I wandered into Dick Manner's lane and picked some red-leaved bramble. I noted that winter was very near, that the grass on the banks was rank and sodden, and the sedges and reeds by the little streams were brown and bent and lay low in the running water. Yes, winter was coming. The long hours in the soft, cool wind and warm sunshine, and fragrant lanes and fields were at an end. The hawthorn hedges were bare of leaf, and the branches of the oak and mountain ash—the longest-lived of the big trees—were naked and forlorn. I sighed and went home. Why was summer so short and winter so long? It would have been quite as easy to arrange it the other way about. I paused when I reached Sandy Lane. I would go straight into the house; mother would be wanting me. But I didn't. My feet carried me to

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

the yard and the wash-house, from whence the sound of voices proceeded. There lay Sukey white in death on the floor. Bill was pouring boiling water over her, and Sammy was scraping her. She looked resigned and peaceful.

"Twenty score if she's an ounce, Miss Hazelt," said Sammy with pride.

"Yes, she digested her food well," I replied.

"An' she came along as quiet as a dog on a string, and she was *that* fat she couldn't screech," remarked Bill comfortingly.

But I had no craving for details, and went into the house reflecting what a curious and sad thing is life for some of God's creatures.

The next two days were filled with curing and pickling and boiling, and sausage-making and pork pies, and I never once gave way to irritability; in fact, I am so amiable and gentle that I am becoming nervous that something may happen. Perhaps I am growing good! Perhaps I am braced and strengthened and invigorated both in mind and body for my change. Or perhaps mother and Angela discovered in my absence that after all I am not so bad. Angela has ceased to watch me warily out of the corner of her eye each time I enter the room, which always gave me the impression that she was a detective on the track of a base criminal. She does not adopt those martyred, injured tones of old when she requests me to dust the drawing-room or help brush the mattresses on bedroom-cleaning day.

AN ALL-HALLOWS' E'EN PARTY.

She does not keep reminding me that she, mother, Elizabeth, and Rose are simply run off their legs with work, while I look on and do nothing.

Or does she do these things? After all, she may, and perhaps it is only *I* who am changed. I am so bright and happy and unselfish, as I said before, and so filled with a desire to do kind things for others, that I feel like *Ministering Children*, and am quite nervous of being caught up to heaven like Elijah without dying. I am not yet ready to go. I am invited to tea, with mother and Angela, to Mr. Inderwick's, and I want to wear my new, blue, beaver hat.

At last I have met that man. It was at Mrs. Moss's party on "All-Hallows' E'en," and I like him—rather.

I remembered what Aunt Menelophe advised, and I behaved towards him as though nothing had happened; and he was *so* magnanimous.

He was not there the first part of the evening, and it was a little dull. It is difficult to make Mr. and Mrs. Moss realise that we are grown up.

Angela and I wore our white, embroidered muslins, which were freshly got-up by Mrs. Flutterby for the occasion, and were as starchy as our curtains.

I thought it would be a pleasant change for Heatherland to see my new silk from Rea's in Basnett Street; but Angela said, "Ridiculous! Think what it would be like when we play games!"

I had forgotten the games.

It was a pitch-dark night, and Rose accompanied

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

us to the Moss's with a lantern. Mother always sends Rose with us. She says it is safer along these lonely roads. This generalisation I have never been able to follow. Rose is considerably younger than Angela, and much smaller in stature than I. Then, too, she has to return alone, which I think far from safe. But mother says it is quite different for her, as she is not in the same social position. Surely blackguards and thieves and evil men bent on dark deeds do not worry about class distinctions! Some day I know Rose will be murdered in Sandy Lane, and then mother will be sorry.

We were the first to arrive, Angela is so punctual. Mr and Mrs. Moss, Frederick, and four daughters received us in the drawing-room with cups of coffee. Frederick was looking tragic. He stared at the ceiling and gnawed his moustache. I guessed an epic poem was simmering.

Rosabel and Alicia Hawthorn were the next to be announced. Rosabel had on a new blue frock, which annoyed me excessively. She had risked the games. Why hadn't I? Then Mr. Oates bulked large in the doorway, followed by the Honourable Horatio Stanhope—a nephew. Mrs. Oates was removing her hat. The Honourable Horatio caused a flutter, but unfortunately he is a little bow-legged.

Then one by one the young members of the Heatherland "families" trooped in. Mr. and Mrs. Oates were the only grown-ups. They are invited to all functions, otherwise they would invite them-

AN ALL-HALLOWS' E'EN PARTY.

selves. Mr. Oates says the cloth should be represented at all times and all seasons; it lends a restraining influence. Perhaps he thinks we should become too uncontrolled over "Turn the Trencher" if he were not present. Mrs. Moss's parties always open with "Turn the Trencher."

We filed into the organ-room, which has a polished floor, and took up our positions.

Is there anyone in this world who has not met that fascinating game "Turn the Trencher"?

Whenever I am specially dull and depressed I just think of "Turn the Trencher." I fancy I hear the twirl of the little, wooden tray on the polished floor. I hear someone call "Poppy," and I dash forward in wild haste. Am I too late? Shall I catch it?

We are all loyal to each other—we Heather-landites—in the matter of names. We never poach each other's. I have been "Poppy" from time immemorial, and Angela is "Camelia," which seems to suit her so admirably. For is not a camelia the neatest and primmest and most composed of flowers? Angela slides down the room with an undulating movement when "Camelia" is called. She doesn't bustle, and she is always in time. I would give much to see Angela once miss the trencher, but she never will. Angela never misses things.

After "Turn the Trencher" we played "General Post." In this again we invariably stick to our own names. I should be really angry if anyone claimed Timbuctoo. I should feel like a parson who has

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

been done out of his tithes by some stupid parliamentary bill.

“The post runs between Timbuctoo and the North Pole” calls out Mrs. Moss in dulcet tones. It is a frenzied moment. The blindfolded one is close on my heels. Shall I dodge her? With lithe, snake-like movements I creep along the floor. I coil and uncoil, I dodge, I double, I feint, and glide breathless into the North Pole’s chair. The North Pole is Frederick Moss. He has allowed himself to be caught deliberately. He looks well posing in the middle of the room, with his sprouting red moustache peeping below the handkerchief; and he is so long in catching another town that we become tired.

“Hands up for ‘Clumps,’ ” calls Mrs. Moss in an inspiring voice. Up go our hands, for “Clumps” is an instructive game, an education in itself. I think after “Turn the Trencher” I like “Clumps” next best.

“You go out, Hazel.”

I bow with surprised pleasure, and the Honourable Horatio accompanies me to the hall. We select the wart on Oliver Cromwell’s nose.

“Is it animal? ” whispers the Hon. Horatio as we enter the room.

“Of course,” I reply. “Did you think it was vegetable? ”

We each sit down in the middle of our respective “Clump.” Questions in whispers fly about the room like greased lightning. I parry, I dissemble,

AN ALL-HALLOWS' E'EN PARTY.

but they are hot on the scent, and in a moment a wild clapping of hands announces that my "Clump" has won.

The other "Clump" looks aggrieved. "But he said it was ornamental," and accusing fingers are pointed at the Hon. Horatio. The Hon. Horatio twirls and fidgets on his music-stool, and looks unhappy.

"Now for refreshments. But perhaps nobody wants refreshments," says Mr. Moss.

He makes the same little joke every year, and we all laugh. We like Mr. Moss; he is a dear, and so kind to young people, and has such a beautiful white beard.

We scatter ourselves about the dining-room and devour oyster *pâtés* and chicken creams. I can see Angela counting up the cost of the *pâtés* and wondering if the cases are home-made. I eat six. "Turn the Trencher" is hungry work. Then we pass on to jellies and sweets, and I raise a large spoonful of my favourite apple snow cream to my mouth. How delicious it is! When I am a rich woman I shall have apple snow every Sunday for dinner, and always on Bank Holidays.

Then the most exciting moment of the evening arrives. We are led to a small breakfast-room, where on the floor rests a large tub full of water and apples. "Ducking-apple" night must be observed. Each person ducks in turn, and he or she who catches the most apples in his or her mouth receives a prize.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

Mrs. Moss remarks it is only for quite young people, and the elder ones may look on if they like. Some of them range themselves in chairs round the room. I don't care if I'm young or old, I mean to duck for apples till I'm fifty. It is the only real bit of fun in the evening.

My turn has come. I fasten the big, Turkish towel round my bare neck and shoulders in case of accident; I push back my hair; I kneel on a woolly mat; I take a deep, long breath, and the next minute I am chivying a small, foolish apple round and round the tub. It bobs under as my teeth are about to close on it; it shoots up like a cork and turns somersaults; it dances and dives and spins round. I am getting angry and very wet. Slowly and surely I manœuvre it to the side of the tub. I press it closely, and my teeth fasten upon it like a hungry wolf's. With a dripping face I emerge from the tub and drop the apple upon the floor.

Cheer upon cheer greet my triumph, and, turning round, I espy Mr. Inderwick smiling broadly in the doorway. Hastily I gather myself up. Why does Fate always put me into the most ridiculous attitudes every time *that* man darkens my path? It is too bad. He walks across the room with his slow, heavy gait, and, shaking hands with Mrs. Moss, apologises for being late.

"I was detained by business," I hear him explain, "and afterwards—well, Sandy Lane is very sandy, and Rocky Lane is horribly rocky."

AN ALL-HALLOWS' E'EN PARTY.

Mrs. Moss laughs, and out of the corner of my eye I see him glancing round the room for a chair. The only vacant seat is by me. Its late occupant is now ducking for apples in his turn—the Hon. Horatio Stanhope—and is causing much laughter thereby. He looks at the chair for a moment, then at me, and hesitates. I feel my cheeks growing hot, and try to mop my wet face and hair unconcernedly. Then he deliberately crosses the room to Angela, and I hear him ask her for an introduction to me. Angela looks astonished, and well she may.

“But don't you know Hazel?” I hear my sister say. “She is the girl in white with dark hair who has just been ducking for apples.”

I cannot catch his reply above the splashings of the Hon. Horatio and the general laughter. But Angela rises and brings him to me, and says—

“This is Mr. Inderwick.”

He bows gravely, and takes the seat beside me without offering his hand. His calmness takes my breath away. Has he forgotten my rudeness in the stubbly field? or does he simply regard me in the light of a spoilt child? Then Aunt Menelophe's advice flashes across my mind, “Be natural, and behave just as though nothing had happened.” I feel, too, that it is impossible to be dignified when he has just seen me with my head in a tub. So, as quick as lightning, I turn round and offer him my hand in friendly fashion.

“How do you do, Mr. Inderwick? I am glad

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

to renew our acquaintance," I say lightly. "It is many years since we met. I should hardly have known you."

My heart is beating thickly; I am dreadfully nervous, in spite of my airiness. How will he take it? A puzzled look steals across his countenance for a moment, and he knits his brows. Then I begin to enjoy myself, and have some difficulty in suppressing a giggle. He glances at me swiftly for a second, but my face is inscrutable—at least, so I imagine. His gaze returns to the apple-ducker with interest.

"Yes," he says at length, "it is many years since we met. I shouldn't have known you either."

It is my turn to start now, but he doesn't observe it. He is laughing with the others, and is certainly very indifferent. I wish he would pay more attention to me.

"How long ago is it since you saw me?" I inquire. "Am I as much changed as that?"

"Yes, you are very much altered. It is about three wee—I mean fourteen years," he says, without looking at me.

"Oh, of course. How time flies!" I remark brilliantly.

"Yes," he says, equally brilliantly.

Then a silence falls between us, and I study the soles of the Hon. Horatio's patent shoes, which are turned towards me from the mat upon which he kneels.

AN ALL-HALLOWS' E'EN PARTY.

"I was quite a tiny girl in those days," I presently remark, "and we went cockling together."

"Yes," he replies.

"And I got myself very dirty."

"Yes," he says again.

I begin to feel irritated. I wish he were not quite so monosyllabic. I hate men who invariably reply as though each word were worth its weight in gold.

"But perhaps you have forgotten it all?" I inquire, the least shade tartly.

"Perhaps I have," he says; and then he turns round suddenly and smiles at me.

The smile might mean anything. It is quizzical and kind, and amused and sarcastic and whimsical all in the same breath, and is altogether so irresistible that before I know what I am doing I am smiling back at him like an easily-pleased infant.

"Ah!" he says, and the smile broadens into a laugh, "now I know you."

And just at this exceedingly interesting moment Mrs. Moss announces it is my turn to duck. How much longer is this foolish game to continue? My interest in it has gone, and my luck has vanished. I chase a hard, green apple round the tub till I am dizzy. It is as elusive as a shadow. I give it a final vicious snap, and it merely shoots below like a torpedo boat. I surrender amidst roars of laughter, and I emerge soaked, and vanish upstairs to dry myself and brush my hair.

When I descended, they had all returned to the

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

drawing-room, and Mr. and Mrs. Moss were whispering in a corner.

"We are going to finish up the evening with a little dance," announces Mrs. Moss. "Will you all help to move the furniture?"

The doors of the organ-room are thrown open, and Mrs. Moss breaks into a seductive waltz.

Seventeen girls lean in careless attitudes against the walls, and try not to remember that there are only seven men amongst them, and one of them is Frederick Moss.

I hear a manly tread behind me. I imagine it is Mr. Inderwick, and turn round to find the Hon. Horatio is offering me his arm.

"Ha!" he says, "may I have the pleasure?"

Now I feel inclined to kick the Hon. Horatio, I am so disappointed; but I place my hand on his arm and—we leap into the air. I had expected to waltz, and the leap surprises me. But Mr. Stanhope appears to enjoy it. After each jump through space he says "Ha!" Sometimes we leap into other people, and I am badly hurt; and just when I am at my last gasp he plumps me down on a chair, says, "Thanks awfully, ha!" and leaves me.

I lean my head dizzily against the wall, and feel very sea-sick and miserable, and my frock is torn; and then Mr. Inderwick came to me.

"I hope you are not hurt?" he said kindly.

"No, thank you," I replied; "but I feel sick and dizzy," and I closed my eyes. I really felt horribly

AN ALL-HALLOWS' E'EN PARTY.

sick, and the room spun round me. Perhaps it was on the top of the apple-ducking. I would have given much at that moment to have put my head somewhere. I felt faint and queer, and I daren't say so. Mr. Inderwick would think me an affected, little fool.

“Would you like me to get you a glass of wine?” I heard his voice say from somewhere; but it sounded faint and small, and as though it did not belong to him.

“No, thank you,” I replied in a still smaller voice; “I’m all right.” And the next moment there was a singing in my ears, a blackness before my eyes, and the whole room vanished.

It must have been only a momentary faintness, for when I came round I was still sitting on the same chair, and Mr. Inderwick was looking gravely at me.

“You turned faint?” he said inquiringly.

“Yes,” I said, “I believe I did.”

“Come with me. This place is hot; the dining-room is cool, and I’ll get you some wine,” he said, and he led me from the room.

I still felt as though I were somebody else and he was a long way off, and I walked shakily and the hall seemed misty.

“Now,” he ordered, “drink this, and don’t speak. You must lie down for a few minutes, and then you’ll feel better.”

I gulped down some neat brandy and dropped my head on to a cushion. How lovely and restful

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

it was! And how far away the music sounded! I think I must have fallen into a dose, for the next time I opened my eyes Angela was leaning over me.

“Mr. Inderwick tells me you turned faint, Hazel. Are you better, and are you ready to go home? Rose has come for us,” she said quite kindly.

“Yes,” I said, “I’m quite ready,” and I rose from the couch. But I was still dizzy, and my knees shook under me. I managed, however, to get upstairs, and by the time my cloak and hat were on and I was outside in the fresh air, the world had resumed its normal proportions.

Mr. Inderwick overtook us, and walked with us to our gate.

“Thank you,” I said, as we shook hands. “It is the first time I have ever felt faint in my life; and I feel grateful to you for not fussing and announcing it to the room. I pride myself on my health and strength; but I think it was six oyster *pâtes* and apple-ducking combined.”

“No,” he said, “it wasn’t. It was because a dancing Dervish caused you to spin round for ten minutes on end, and human nature couldn’t stand it. Good-night.”

“Good-night,” I replied, laughing, and I went into the house feeling quite comforted.

“You turned faint once before, in church, so this makes the second time,” remarked my sister with her customary accuracy.

“So I did,” I replied. “I forgot.”

CHAPTER XI.

WE GO TO TEA WITH MR. INDERWICK, AND I
DESCRIBE THE DUSTING OF PARIAN JUGS.

WHEN Mr. Inderwick's invitation came for us all to go to tea (it was four days after the party), Angela remarked—

“What a strange man! He is very unconventional.”

“Why?” asked mother. “I think it's very friendly and kind of him.”

“It may be,” said Angela. “I don't deny it; but it shows he is unaccustomed to the usages of good society,” and my sister stroked the gathers of a night-gown she was making with extra firmness and precision.

“But why?” again asked mother. “He has invited me to go with you both. He evidently understands the necessity for a chaperon, and I hope my new bonnet will be back in time.”

“That is not the point,” replied Angela. “*Of course* he realises that it would be impossible for us two girls to go to the house alone.”

“Not at all,” I broke in. “I shouldn't care a button. I think it would be great fun to go *quite* by myself.”

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

Angela regarded me in stony surprise for ten seconds, then she resumed her work in shocked silence.

"Well, Angela," resumed mother a little irritably, "what do you mean? Go on. In what way has Mr. Inderwick outraged that which is accepted as correct in good society?"

"By not returning our call, for one thing. It is nearly three weeks since we called on him, and you are aware that a first call should be returned within seven days. And, secondly, he should have waited for the first invitation, for the first advance towards friendship, to have come from us," and Angela closed her lips with a snap.

"Stuff and nonsense! bunkum and rot!" I shouted—I admit rudely. "I never heard such nonsense in the whole of my life. You stay at home, Angela, if you are so mighty particular, and mother and Mr. Inderwick and I will have a nice little tea-party by our three selves."

Once again Angela regarded me in the way she regards spiders should they dare to cross a ceiling in her presence, and I shrivelled up. I cannot withstand Angela's gaze for more than sixty seconds at a time. My bones turn to water and my tongue cleaves to the roof of my mouth.

"But really, Angela," I continued weakly, "do you think we need observe all this etiquette quite so rigorously in a country village, and we have known Mr. Inderwick so many years—in a fashion?"

My sister unbent a little.

WE GO TO TEA WITH MR. INDERWICK.

"Perhaps under the circumstances, and as the invitation is for afternoon tea only, we might accept it, though I'm not sure that it is wise."

Then she added a five minutes' lecture upon my vulgar expressions and language.

"Where *did* you pick them up? It is really distressing to hear you."

"From Sammy and Jerry and other nice men in Heatherland," I replied, as I pushed mother into a chair at the writing table and placed pen and paper before her.

The letter was written and sealed before Angela could change her mind, and I rushed off to Sammy with it, and told him to take it to the Old Hall Farm *at once*.

"And don't lose it, Sammy," I said, "for it's most important."

And I believe Sammy winked, but I'm not sure. I try not to think so.

Tuesday seemed a long time in coming, but when it did it was lovely and fresh and sunny, with white clouds very high up in the sky chasing each other across the blue.

I meant to give myself quite a long time to dress, but the flecks of sunshine on the lawn and bare trees kept inviting me to watch them. And the light and shadow playing hide-and-seek on the hills in Wales and across the fields were so delightful and frolicsome, that I was only half ready when Angela's voice came up the stairs from the hall.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL

"We are ready, Hazel, and waiting."

"Coming," I shouted as I slipped into my black coat and skirt.

I could have wished for something different, but when the pale blue beaver surmounted them and I saw the sweeping curl of the ostrich feather on my hair I felt somewhat comforted. Never before had such a lovely hat descended upon Heatherland. "It will gasp," I said to myself. "Rosabel will be *simply* green."

I paused and studied myself for a moment in the mirror. Was the tall, black figure confronting me graceful or merely weedy? The section of my brain, which is given over to vanity, whispered "Graceful," but the minute cell of my consciousness, which contains a fragment of truthfulness, shouted out, "No, merely weedy."

"Quite right," I said with a sigh; "merely weedy. I must drink more milk and become graceful."

"Hazel, *are* you coming?" came Angela's voice.

"Angela," I said, as I walked slowly down the stairs buttoning my new, white gloves, "it is vulgar to shout. You have often told me so. It is a bad example for Rose and Elizabeth. Besides, it does not look well to arrive at a place on the stroke of the hour. It looks greedy. It looks as though we didn't get enough to eat."

But Angela missed the latter part of my sentence. Her neat brown figure had vanished through the

WE GO TO TEA WITH MR. INDERWICK.

front door, which seemed a pity. Advice is so good for one at times.

"You shouldn't tease your sister so," said mother with a sigh. "I wish you two were fonder of each other."

"Mother, darling, you might as well wish that a bee and a cricket would consent to keep house together."

"Which is the bee?" said mother with a show of interest.

"Angela is," I replied. "She is always busy, and is always storing up food for the winter in the shape of jams and pickled cabbage, bottled fruits and pickled eggs; and in addition she secretes a sharp sting somewhere about her person."

"And you are the cricket?"

"Yes, I'm—

"The silly young cricket, accustomed to sing
Through the warm, sunny months of gay summer
and spring,
Who began to complain when she found that at home
Her cupboard was empty and winter had come."

"Yes," said mother, "you are certainly the cricket. You are lazy and very naughty."

I laughed and hugged her.

"Mother," I said, "if you look at me like that I am bound to hug you."

"How do you like my new bonnet now it's altered?" she inquired anxiously as we followed Angela through the gate.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL

"I think it's a perfect duck," I replied; "and no wonder Mr. Inderwick invited you to tea. Chaperon, indeed! A man like that doesn't worry his head about chaperons."

Mother looked pleased.

"No," she said, "I don't think he would."

The sun was shining brightly upon us as we walked along the Old Hall road and through a dear, little footpath across the fields to the house. We passed the farmyard, with its nice-smelling haystacks; and geese hissed at us, and turkeys gobbled and strutted about in complete contentment, little recking of the proximity of Christmas with its attendant sausages and bread sauce.

"I like farmyards," I said, "and farm-house kitchens with their old oak settles, and hams hanging from the blackened rafters, and blazing fires with great haunches of venison turning in front of them; and the dairy round the corner, full of cream and delicious, yellow butter and eggs."

"When butter is made at a farm the milk is generally poor and the cream thin," remarked Angela practically as she rang the front-door bell.

"What a lovely hall!" I whispered; but mother and Angela were far too taken up with the maid-servant's appearance to listen to me.

"She's dressed to-day," I heard mother whisper.

"Yes, but her cap is much too jaunty. It looks fast," answered Angela severely.

WE GO TO TEA WITH MR. INDERWICK.

I thought she looked charming, but didn't say so. We were shown into a room containing four armchairs, a square, solid table, a bookcase, and a large man reclining in the largest armchair I have ever met. The man was Mr. Inderwick, and I fancy he was asleep from the way he started up.

After greeting us, he placed mother in one chair with a hassock at her feet, which was very thoughtful of him. Angela in another with a cushion at her back, which made me want to smile. Fancy Angela with a cushion! And me in a third, without either cushion or hassock. He didn't say much, but gave one the impression he was working hard.

Then he seated himself and heaved a sigh of satisfaction.

"I hope you are all comfortable, and if you want anything please ask for it," he said in the tones of a steward on board a ship.

We assured him we had never been so comfortable in our lives, and I meant it. The chair was low and roomy and deep, and the room gave one a sense of space and comfort and a freedom from small things which fall over. On the mantelpiece were a tall jar of chrysanthemums, seven pipes, and about fifty boxes of matches in neat little piles of dozens. A large blue bowl rested on the solid table at Mr. Inderwick's elbow, and in it was tobacco ash—nothing else. The bookcase reached from floor to ceiling, as mother described, and books of every size, shape, and description filled its shelves, all

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

in perfect order and neat as a new pin. The carpet was warm and thick. There was nothing else in the room excepting the chairs we sat upon.

The windows were bare of curtains, and the Dee could be seen stretching away like a wide, silver ribbon.

“What a lovely view!” I said, as I stepped to the west window.

“Yes, isn’t it fine?” he replied. “It would be hard to beat those fields just below us, and then the river beyond backed by the Welsh hills and a sunset once a day.”

“Not always,” I said.

“No,” he laughed, “more’s the pity. But what I like about the view, is, that the fields are always changing colour. First, they are a vivid green before the grass is cut; then they turn into a sort of silver-grey green when the hay has been carried; then some of them are gold when the corn is ripening, and these in their turn become a different colour when the corn has been cut; and then they are ploughed, and are sad and brown; and later they will probably be covered with snow, and I shall have a dazzling white world to gaze upon.”

I looked at him in quick sympathy.

“You like fields and the river and those things?”

“Yes,” he said simply, “I do.”

A little cough of irritation from Angela brought me back to my chair, and the smart maid arrived at the same instant with tea.

WE GO TO TEA WITH MR. INDERWICK.

"If you please, sir, Mrs. Egerton says as you didn't tell her about the ladies coming to tea, and she has no cake; but she has sent in plenty of pertater cakes and hot scones! And when you are ready for more will you ring?"

The maid's voice sounded as though she were repeating a well-learned lesson or something out of the Bible. There was a sad, almost reproachful ring in it, and Mr. Inderwick looked guilty.

He drew a handkerchief out of his pocket. It contained two knots, and he eyed them gravely.

"One was to tell Mrs. Egerton about your coming to tea, and the other—why, what was the other?" He stroked his head, and became lost in thought.

"Perhaps the other was to remind you to give us tea when it came," I suggested mildly, and Angela frowned at me severely.

He chuckled for a minute.

"Perhaps it was," he said. "I'm awfully absent-minded, Mrs. Wycherley, about things," he continued, putting four lumps of sugar in one cup. "And I am always tying knots in my handkerchief, and sometimes it takes me an hour or so to remember what they were for."

"How awkward," replied mother, with her eyes fixed on the milk-jug. "Would you like me to pour out for you?"

"Thanks awfully," he said gratefully. "Was I doing anything wrong?"

"Oh, no," said mother, lying bravely; "but I

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL. *

know it's a task gentlemen don't care about," and rising, she took his place.

His relief was laughable to behold. I thought I had never met anyone with two such strongly-defined sides to his character. When he was doing nothing—merely a looker-on—he was calmness and coolness personified. Put him in the position of host, or a worker, which brought direct attention to bear upon him, and he was like a great awkward schoolboy.

He became free-and-easy at once. Mother was the hostess for the time being, and he was so entertaining, and the potato cakes were so buttery and good, that I felt I would like to go every day to such tea-parties.

How much jollier men were than women! I reflected. Aunt Menelophe said women were more interesting than men. I wondered where they secreted themselves.

He interrupted my train of thought.

"You are better, Miss Hazel?"

"Quite," I replied; "but how did you know?"

"You seem to like potato cakes. I am glad, as I forgot the cake."

"Mr. Inderwick," I said, "you shouldn't comment upon your guests' appetites."

He laughed.

"Was I commenting? I am sorry. I thought I only said that I was glad you liked potato cakes. Will you have another?"

"Please," I replied. "And will you tell me why

WE GO TO TEA WITH MR. INDERWICK.

you have so many boxes of matches on your mantelpiece?"

"They are for lighting my pipe."

"Yes," I said, "that is obvious. But why so many?"

"I don't call that number many. I dislike the feeling of being short of matches. Nothing depresses me more. So Mrs. Egerton has instructions to put a gross of Bryant and May's on my mantelpiece once a week."

"So there is no room for ornaments?"

"No," he replied, "there's no room for ornaments."

"How nice!" I ejaculated. "And you have no Parian jugs to wash or bronze horses to dust?"

"No. What are Parian jugs?"

I had quite forgotten mother and Angela. I realised there was somebody in the world who hadn't met a Parian jug.

"A Parian jug is white," I said, "and has a shaped, thin spout; on the body part of the jug grapes and pomegranates grow, and round the neck vine leaves and roses cling. And once a week you have to scrub the grapes with a brush and soap and hot water, and—"

"Hazel," cried mother and Angela together in shocked tones, "how can you? What *are* you talking about? Mr. Inderwick is not interested, I'm s—"

"But I am, Mrs. Wycherley," interrupted Mr. Inderwick, "vastly interested. Go on, Miss Hazel."

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

And I went on. The blood of ancestors who had owned and loved Parian jugs was in my veins, and if I could not extol the beauties of a Parian jug, who could ?

“And you were saying,” Mr. Inderwick remarked, with his eyes fixed on my face, “that you take a brush and—”

“Yes,” I went on, “you take a brush, and you worm it in and out of the grapes and pomegranates, and they stand forth revealed in all their pure, white beauty. And then you dip the jug in clean, cold water ; and you wipe it tenderly with soft linen ; and you blow upon it gently to dry all the little tendrils and curves ; and lastly you place it on paper, about two feet from a nice, warm fire, to complete the drying. And then you return it carefully to its own particular spot on the mantelpiece.”

“I understand,” said Mr. Inderwick softly. “And how do you treat bronze horses ? I am anxious to learn.”

“You flick them,” I said. “You flick them with a little brush made of feathers. And the legs that paw the air you wipe over with pure olive oil. And you twist the corner of a duster into a spiral point, like a radish, to poke into its eyes and mouth and—”

“Hazel, I am going,” said mother in frigid tones.

“Yes, Mr. Inderwick, I am sure we have taken up your time long enough. And you cannot possibly

WE GO TO TEA WITH MR. INDERWICK.

be interested in our private household affairs," came Angela's silky voice. "Good afternoon."

And a great fear fell upon me. What had I said? I shivered as I thought of the walk home. I was only in fun, and mother would never let me come here again.

They were saying good-bye, and mechanically I followed them to the door. I peeped at Mr. Inderwick, and saw that he was sorry and embarrassed at their annoyance.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Wycherley; and I hope you will give me the pleasure of taking tea again with me some day," he said warmly.

Then he shook hands with Angela and me, and was it fancy that he held mine a shade longer than is usual? Perhaps it was, but it helped me to endure the home-going lecture with some small degree of fortitude.

"What a jolly tea! I *have* enjoyed myself," I remarked nervously as we walked across the fields.

Then the flood-gates of Angela's wrath broke upon me. Mother did not say much. I took her arm and whispered I was sorry, and that I had not meant to make fun of the jugs and horses and our method of cleaning them. But Angela's words flowed on endlessly. She made me think of the Amazon and other long rivers when they overflow their banks, and I marvelled at her complete mastery of the English language.

CHAPTER XII.

ON WASH-DAYS.

TO-DAY is dreary and dark. A white mist broods over the garden, and all the little arbutus trees and laurustinus bushes are dripping with moisture, and the mist creeps and creeps and crawls across the lawn like a white wraith, and enfolds the privet hedge and the naked rose-bushes in a dense, white shroud.

November seems to be mourning and weeping for the dead summer, and the garden is desolate and depressed.

Mother and Angela, too, are very depressed. For this is Monday—magic word meaning wash-day! And the mist broods and clings and refuses to lift. And how can clothes dry in a mist? How can they dry when the air contains no drying properties?

Angela has just remarked, for the third time in the space of half an hour, that the wash-day must be postponed. There is a hopeless ring in her voice. She looks at the clock anxiously. Time is getting on. Mrs. Flutterby is waiting in the kitchen for the final decision—“to be or not to be?” The tubs stand in expectant rows in the wash-house. The

ON WASH DAYS.

mangle has been oiled in its machinery parts, and its rollers have been scrubbed and cleansed. The dolly-peg stands firmly on its three legs and says, "Here I am ready for anything!" Packets of Reckitt's Blue, and Hudson's Soap and Sunlight Soap and several other soaps are neatly stacked ready to do execution. The linen has been put in soak. All is ready. And still the mist hangs above a dank, sodden world.

While mother and Angela discuss sadly the vagaries of our English climate I have crept away. My opinion on the really important things of this life is never asked for by my family. Should it be given by me unsought, it is not considered or valued, nor does it carry any weight. When I suggested that the wash-day should be put off, Angela snapped, "Impossible. Mrs. Flutterby has arrived." And when I said mildly, "Well, then, why doesn't she begin?" mother replied, "Don't ask foolish questions. Look at the mist." And when once again, from a sheer spirit of inquiry, I asked, "Couldn't the clothes be dried before the kitchen fire for once?" they simply looked at me as though I had suggested that the clothes should be dried by the fires of hell. "Well," I persisted doggedly, "why shouldn't they be dried in the kitchen? Other people's clothes are dried in kitchens. Why shouldn't ours?" And then they asked me if I had ever noticed the *colour* of other people's linen. Did other people's linen look as though it had been dried in the pure, sweet air? Did

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

it look white as the driven snow? Did it look clean and wholesome? Or did it look grey and yellow and dirty? "It would be the thin edge of the wedge," said Angela. "Once allow the clothes by the kitchen fire, Mrs. Flutterby would be always hankering after the kitchen fire."

Such reasoning I could not follow, so I stole away. Up here it is chilly, but it is peaceful, and I can reflect on life and upon the things that make up life.

A wash-day has always been the most important event in our lives. When I look back upon the years that are gone, each Monday stands out clear and distinct. In fact, I sometimes feel my whole life has been composed of Mondays. If I close my eyes I can see mother's night-gown bellying in the wind, or the pantry tea-cloths waving about in their exuberance at being released from the dolly-tub.

Every Sunday morning in church I clasp my hands, and pray fervently that Monday will be fine, that a nice, fresh wind will blow to dry the clothes, that the sun may be strong to bleach and whiten them, that Mrs. Flutterby will be punctual to arrive and not thirst after too much ale throughout the day.

I say this in the Litany when the congregation is interceding for the Royal Family. I am not disloyal, but the family washing naturally affects the tenor of my life more than the welfare of a mere king or queen.

Should my prayer be answered, and Monday prove fine and sunny and dry, mother and Angela soar to

ON WASH DAYS.

great heights of happiness. And a feeling of exhilaration pervades the air, such as one never experiences on ordinary days of the week. As the scent of Sunlight Soap greets our nostrils, Angela becomes almost buoyant. And as the fumes of ammonia steal from the wash-house up the steps and along the passages and hall into the dining-room, she and mother exchange glances and smile contentedly, for does it not mean that Mrs. Flutterby is washing the woollens in the most approved and accepted fashion?

About ten o'clock I surprise them in furtive glances directed towards the window. This is the hour when Elizabeth should pass with the first batch of clothes to the drying-ground in the croft. Should she be late Angela begins to fidget and mother glances at the clock. What is the cause of the delay? Has Mrs. Flutterby been gossiping with Elizabeth, or has she been indulging in too extensive a lunch? She breakfasts at six, and washes a complete family of children and cleans a house before she comes to us at eight, so an early lunch is necessary. This desire for numerous meals causes Angela acute distress each week. It is not the food she grudges, but the time expended in eating it; and Mrs. Flutterby's conversational abilities are undoubtedly phenomenal.

During our midday dinner, which is necessarily cold on wash-days, mother and Angela invariably discuss soap. In their secret hearts I am convinced that each is of the opinion that Sunlight Soap con-

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

tains soda, but neither will allow it. The clothes are a beautiful colour, fair and white, and unsurpassed in Heatherland, so whatever ingredients the soap may contain they are loth to give it up. Then it has become clear to me that Angela has a leaning towards trying a new starch called "Tomtit," which, according to its advertisements, imparts a marvellous gloss to the linen. Mother, however, says that her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother used "Stiffrill's" starch to the end of their days, and what was good enough for them is good enough for anybody. At first she said this in very decided tones, but each Monday she visibly weakens in her argument. Angela is gradually wearing her down. It is never my sister's method to get her own way too quickly. She believes in the old adage that continual dropping wears away a stone. Mother is only of red sandstone durability where Angela is concerned, and she is wearing away rapidly. I am as convinced as Angela that by Christmas we shall be stiffening the collars, cuffs, and serviettes with "Tomtit" Starch.

I remember when I was about sixteen once playing a cruel, practical joke upon mother and Angela. Rushing into the dining-room, I breathlessly announced that Mrs. Flutterby was *boiling* the blankets.

I never knew before that mother and Angela could run so quickly. And unfortunately Angela tripped in her exceeding haste, and fell down the wash-house steps into a tub of blue. When I saw her emerge,

ON WASH DAYS.

such a fear overwhelmed me that my teeth chattered. I did not wait to listen to her conversation. I just bolted to the most inaccessible corner of the garden, where I lay down under some big rhubarb leaves and said my prayers. I lay there for the rest of the day alternately praying and eating ; for dear Sammy, who discovered me, brought me an apple pasty from his own larder, so I was well nourished. When it was dark I crept into the house to bed, but my sleep was fitful. And when the next morning I was informed that I must write out twenty French verbs after school hours I did not rush at them with eagerness. In fact, I suggested apologising to Angela instead, which proved that I must have felt pretty slack. Drawing, quartering and hanging would, as a rule, have been an infinitely more attractive punishment to me than apologising. My proposal was accepted, and with murder in my heart I stood before Angela and repeated the set formula—"Please, Angela, I am very sorry, and I hope you 'll forgive me." I never waited to hear her assurance of forgiveness on those trying occasions, all I wanted was to get away and hit something hard and roll the lawn. Rolling the lawn was usually the best sedative after too much of Angela.

I have just been downstairs and find that wash-day is off. They are moderately cheerful, and are discussing the rearrangement of the week's work ; for, of course, if the washing be done to-morrow instead of to-day the ironing must be done on Wednesday,

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

and Wednesday's work done on Thursday, and Thursday's on Friday, and Friday's to-day, for it could not be got in on Saturday—kitchen-cleaning day. Oh, dear! I am getting quite dizzy. What I mean is, Friday's work must be done to-day, which is a grave step to take, for, as Angela has just remarked, to clean the bathroom, lavatory, hall, landings and stairs, and silver on a Monday instead of Friday seems like reversing the laws of Nature. Bathrooms are always cleaned on Friday mornings and silver on Friday afternoons, and this rule has been in force since the beginning of time. If Moses possessed a bathroom—and probably he did, for he was great on sanitary laws—his wife Zipporah would say to him, “Moses, will you go out for a bit and talk to the children of Israel, for I want to get the bathroom and stairs cleaned, and you are in the way; and don't forget to wipe your feet on the mat when you come in, for the wilderness is dirty at this time of the year.”

Now I must go. I can hear Angela calling. She imagines I have been dusting my room all this time. It must be nice to have a vivid imagination.

These last few days have been dull, and Angela has often referred to my lapse of good manners at the Old Hall Farm. “Never discuss your private affairs in public,” she says; “never be personal.”

I have not come across Mr. Inderwick since that evening, though I have been many walks. Once I saw him ride past the front gate, and he stared at

ON WASH DAYS.

our windows. I was behind the curtains, and had a good look at him. It is so difficult to do this when you are with him, he has such a direct, disconcerting way of staring back at you. He is ugly, undoubtedly; at least, Angela says he is. But I am not so sure of it myself. He reminds me one moment of a rugged, craggy rock—strong, taciturn, reticent, moody, rude almost; and the next of a smiling, placid, gentle declivity—full of soft places and unexpected sympathies, light-hearted, kind, frank, and almost boyish. His clothes are abominable—unbrushed, wrinkly, with baggy pockets and hunching shoulders. His figure is heavy almost to ungainliness. His legs—and he's always in knickerbockers—are big and his hands and feet are large. But when once you meet his direct, frank gaze and big, broad smile, and hear his wholesome, deep-toned laugh, you forget all the ugliness and ruggedness and uncouthness. You just feel he'd be a good friend; a man who'd pull you through your tight places; a man to rely upon and trust; a man with a big mind in a big case, who would never do a mean thing or ever say a small one; and a man who, if he wanted a thing, would probably never give in till he had got it.

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. INDERWICK ACCOMPANIES ME TO GAYTON TO BUY BUTTER.

I AM experiencing an unwonted sensation of exhilaration and satisfaction. Mr. Inderwick and I have been for a walk together, and up to the present Angela does not know anything about my misdemeanour, as she would term it. She will know sooner or later. Everything is known by everybody about everybody in Heatherland if you give it time. Quite ten faces peeped out from behind curtains and through doors as we passed along the village, and the owners of those ten faces naturally possess ten tongues, and some of them are of great length.

Angela thought I was getting the butter at Gayton. So I was ; but Mr. Inderwick was with me, of which she certainly would not approve. Mr. Inderwick is a man and I am a girl ; therefore we should not take walks together.

It seems unfortunate that men and women cannot be on terms of any degree of intimacy with one another unless they are married, and then they don't appear to want to be intimate.

MR. INDERWICK ACCOMPANIES ME TO GAYTON.

Was it from a sense of facetiousness that Mrs. Butterworth started to make butter more worth one-and-sixpence a pound than any other in the district?

“It is a cruel price,” sighed mother, as she dived into the intricacies of her petticoat for her purse. “In my young days you could get beautiful fresh butter for a shilling.”

“Yes, but think of the price of sugar and tea in those days,” I responded cheerfully; but she refused to be cheered.

“It was better tea and much better sugar. There was none of that dreadful, deceptive beet on the market, and the tea was not a mixture of chopped hay and tannin.”

“Well, perhaps proportionately Mrs. Butterworth’s butter at one-and-sixpence is much superior to that for which you paid a shilling,” I suggested.

Mother’s head shook gloomily.

“No, it isn’t,” she said; “nothing is better.”

I felt unequal to grappling with such pessimism, so I kissed her on the forehead and left her to Angela, who entered the room with the week’s mending in her arms.

“They will be happy with that,” I said to Dibbs, who circled in front of me down the garden walk, and Dibbs barked “So they will.”

“Do you think they would mend me my stockings, Dibbs, if I asked them nicely?”

“Perhaps,” said Dibbs, looking doubtful.

I returned to the dining-room. Mother, with a

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

darning needle in her hand, and her feet on a hassock, sat with a beatific expression on her countenance.

“Mother, will you mend me my stockings?” I asked boldly.

“Don’t encourage Hazel in her laz——,” began Angela; but mother smiled at me in acquiescence. and, brushing Angela on one side, I just took her in my arms.

“Mother,” I said, “I *do* love you. You *are* kind to me. I do so hate mending stockings; it is not laziness.”

“No? It is not laziness,” said mother, laughing. “What is it then?”

“Sheer inability. I simply can’t mend stockings. They pucker up, and draw and drag, and get bodgy, and won’t mend properly.”

“No,” said mother, “they won’t. I redarned the ones you did last week.”

“Did you? But what a waste of time for two people to mend one pair of stockings! Doesn’t it seem so to you?”

“Perhaps. You are very tricky, Hazel.”

“Am I?” I laughed, as I kissed her again. “You have to be when you live with two such wonderfully clever, good women.”

Then I whistled Dibbs, who was waiting in the hall with the whole cares of the world on his shoulders, and once more we sallied forth.

“Now, Dibbs,” I ordered sternly, “you must behave to-day. No rabbits. Do you understand?”

MR. INDERWICK ACCOMPANIES ME TO GAYTON.

"Yes," said Dibbs, as he gave chase to a yellow cat which suddenly popped up from nowhere.

I don't mind how much Dibbs goes for cats. Cats get all they deserve—greedy, sneaky, bad-tempered, cupboard-love-for-you sort of creatures.

It was while the cat was swearing horribly on a wall and Dibbs was barking deliriously at the base of the wall, and I was laughing immoderately in the middle of the village, that Mr. Inderwick walked out of the post office. He came straight to me in his heavy, direct way.

"Where are you going?" he inquired as we shook hands.

"I am going to Gayton for butter," I replied.

"May I walk with you? I am going too."

"What are you going for?" I asked.

Such direct questions must be met with equal directness.

"I am not going for anything specially," he answered without the slightest hesitation. "I just felt as you were going I would go too."

"I see," I said with an inward gasp. "Do you usually go where other people are going?"

"Oh, no. It depends on the person."

"But isn't it a little awkward for the person?" I queried.

"I don't know. I never looked at it in that light."

Then he stopped suddenly. "Don't you want me?"

"Oh, yes," I replied, "I want you. I am glad of your society; I am tired of lonely walks. But

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

what I mean is, that sometimes if you insisted upon accompanying a person upon an expedition, that person might find it inconvenient."

"But the person could say so."

"Yes, I forgot that. But then shouldn't you be offended?"

"No. Why should I? I don't get offended about things."

"Don't you?" I replied. "How nice! I am always getting hurt and offended at something or other."

"That is a pity," he said gravely. "Life is too short to be offended with people about trifles. But then you are very young."

"I suppose I am—by you."

He smiled one of his nice, rare smiles.

"I am not very old, I am thirty-five. Does that seem very old to you?"

"Pretty old," I replied truthfully. "I shouldn't care to be thirty-five."

"You won't mind so much when you get there."

"Yes I shall, I shall mind horribly. I am a woman."

"Do all women mind about getting old?"

"Every one of them," I answered emphatically. "There are one or two liars among them who pretend they don't. But they do—some more than others. Aunt Menelophe says the ones who have been beautiful mind the most of all. Getting old is a real grief to them."

MR. INDERWICK ACCOMPANIES ME TO GAYTON.

“Poor things,” he remarked; “one feels sorry for them. Can’t they do anything?”

“Oh, yes. They paint and powder and massage, and then they look foolish.”

“I didn’t mean that; I meant, couldn’t they do something to fill their lives?”

“Yes. Aunt Menelophe became a ‘looker-on’ when she was forty, and drank tea and read novels.”

“That doesn’t seem much,” he said, laughing.

“No, it doesn’t; but really she only pretends. She is always doing something nice and kind and unselfish for somebody. She leads a most useful life, and is a perfect dear.”

“She sounds nice. Tell me about her,” he said.

That is a way Mr. Inderwick seems to have. He doesn’t appear rude or curious; he is just interested in things and is so quiet and grave and never interrupts, that you rattle away and tell him everything before you know you are even talking.

I told him of Butterby and the ghost and Aunt Menelophe, and the Potteries and the dinner party, and how I dreaded coming home, and the candle grease; and then I stopped suddenly, and went hot all over. Here was I talking of our private affairs, discussing little home matters, saying everything Angela said I ought not to say. It was bad form to discuss personalities with a stranger. It was in bad taste, so she had said; and here was I outraging all refinement of feeling.

“Well?” said Mr. Inderwick, without looking at me.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"Oh, that's all," I replied hurriedly.

"Rather an abrupt ending," he said, turning and smiling.

"Yes," I replied lamely.

He changed the subject of conversation at once. He may not be polished, as Angela says, but he is tactful.

"Stop at this gate a moment. I think the best part of a lane is a gate. You go along for some distance, and you enjoy the beauty of the banks and hedges and the wrens popping in and out, and you think what a seductive, beautiful thing is a narrow, green lane; and then a feeling comes over you all in a minute that you want breathing room, you want space; you want a wider outlook, and lo and behold a gate has appeared. You lean over it, and there is your space. Fields lie before you, with hills beyond; the wide, open country stretches away. Your sense of oppression has gone."

He leant against the gate as he spoke, and I followed his gaze across the fields and Dee to the hills in Wales and the Point of Air.

"Do you know, I thought I was the only person in the world who felt like that?" I said softly. "But I couldn't have put it so well."

He turned one of his long, direct gazes upon me.

"Yes," he said, "you could. You could have put it better. For you are young and impulsive and bubbling over with spirit. I spoke merely of a physical feeling. I want plenty of fresh air, and

MR. INDERWICK ACCOMPANIES ME TO GAYTON.

narrow lanes are stuffy. Your feeling is purely mental. You are cramped, dwarfed, suffocated. You want to do something, you don't know what. You want to go somewhere. You are tired of Heatherland and—" he hesitated—" Parian jugs."

"Yes," I cried eagerly, "that is it. But how did you know? Do *you* feel cramped? Do *you* want to do something too? Are you tired of your narrow life?"

He looked at the hills for a moment thoughtfully.

"No, thank God," he answered presently, "I don't want to do anything. I am thankful to sit down in my armchair and smoke and read. I am jolly grateful to Old Crabby that he has left me in a position to be a 'looker-on.' Once I felt as you do. It was a worrying, uncomfortable sensation; but time and—trouble and hard work knock it out of you."

"Have you had trouble?" I asked.

"Lots! Damnable trouble!"

He did not appear to be conscious that he had sworn. Neither did he apologise. He studied the little fishing-boats sailing along, with an absent eye. He was lost in thought, lost to the world, lost to me and Dibbs.

I studied him as he stared at the boats. Yes, he had suffered; there was no doubt about that. His dark, thick hair was flecked with grey—round the ears it was white. There were deep lines round his mouth, deep parentheses, and deeper lines still on

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

his forehead. A stern, rugged face—full of strength, unlovely in repose, perhaps, with its square chin, clean-shaven, and knitted eyebrows; but how wonderfully attractive when it was lit up by that rare smile!—a smile that lingers in the memory.

“Mr. Inderwick,” I said presently, “should you mind coming back to the world? I have butter to buy at Gayton, and the time is getting on.”

He came back slowly. Then he gave his big shoulders a shake, and stooped and patted Dibbs. Presently he looked at me and smiled.

“Have I kept you? I am sorry. I had forgotten
—”

“My existence,” I interrupted, as I moved away from the gate.

“No, I hadn’t, I was thinking of you.”

“May I ask in connection with what, for you looked sad?”

“Did I? I was thinking of a little sister of mine who also wanted to see ‘life,’ and went under.”

“How do you mean?” I asked softly.

“She was always a restless, little soul with big aspirations. A quiet life in the country did not satisfy her. Then when my father died she, as well as I, had to work for our mother. I had just been called to the Bar, and briefs seemed to shy away from me. My little sister rushed at work as one usually rushes at pleasure. She chose the stage as a profession, and at first did well; she was uncommonly pretty, with laughing sort of eyes and a smile like a

MR. INDERWICK ACCOMPANIES ME TO GAYTON.

bit of sunshine. Then she had an accident, not a very bad one, but her face and one side of her neck were a little marked—it was a fire. After that her engagements began to dwindle. Managers didn't want her; her looks had gone. I don't blame them; but she suffered acutely. Then she took to nursery-governessing. I alone could not make enough at that time to keep the three of us. The nursery-governessing broke her spirit, and she died; and I don't wonder. I saw the woman who had employed her, and I saw the children—after her death—and I felt she was better at rest. But had I known—" He broke off abruptly and set his teeth.

I did not say anything—there seemed to be nothing to say—but I think he felt my sympathy.

"And your mother?" I asked.

"She died a year afterwards from a broken heart. And then briefs began to come in rapidly, and I had any amount of money to spend on—flowers for their grave."

We walked along in silence for some time.

"And so," he said presently, "I am always sorry when I hear of young girls wanting to get away from home. They may be dull, and there may be Parian jugs to wash; but at least there is someone to take an interest in them and look after them."

"Oh, I am well looked after," I observed.

"You say it as though you didn't like it," he laughed.

"I don't."

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

“And yet you are very lucky, if you only knew it.”

“In what way?”

“Why, that there should be someone to want to look after you—to be interested in your comings and goings, to know when you are out, to give you a welcome when you come in.”

“I don’t know that I receive much of a welcome from Angela.”

“Perhaps you don’t deserve it,” he said with a twinkle.

“I certainly do not deserve all I get from her in the way of rebuke.”

“What does she rebuke you about?”

“Everything,” I replied with emphasis, “from the mere fact of my existing at all to the way I dust the legs of the drawing-room chairs.”

“Or the way, perhaps, you don’t dust them.”

“Yes, that’s it,” I said.

He laughed.

“What a jolly little place Heatherland is, and so pretty,” he said, looking across the river.

I looked at him with approval. I am at once in touch with people who like and admire our village.

“Yes,” I replied, “it is quite one of the loveliest spots in the world.”

“You have travelled much?”

“No. I have been to about half a dozen places in my life—Birkenhead, Liverpool, Chester, Blongton, Stafford and Stoke, and a few small villages. Still, I know there is nothing to touch Heatherland.”

MR. INDERWICK ACCOMPANIES ME TO GAYTON.

He seemed amused.

“And you like the people?”

“I dislike the people exceedingly.”

“Why?” he asked in surprise. “I think they seem a very nice, decent lot. I like them, they are so kind and hospitable.”

“Yes,” I said, “but you haven’t lived with them for twenty-one years. Do you realise what it is to live with the same people for twenty-one years, and nine out of every ten of those people are women? Why, already it is buzzed all over Heatherland that Mr. Inderwick and Miss Hazel Wycherley are taking a walk together along Gayton Lane this afternoon.”

“Well,” he said, “it’s very kind of them to be so interested in us.”

“Very,” I said.

And he gave one of his gruff chuckles, and went on chuckling for some minutes.

“It seems to amuse you,” I remarked.

“It does. After living in London and being swallowed up in a vortex of surging human beings, who know nothing about you and care less, it seems positively ridiculous to me that anyone should have the time or inclination to be interested in your movements.”

“Oh, they’ve plenty of time,” I said, as I stopped at Mrs. Butterworth’s farm and knocked at the door.

Mrs. Butterworth is precisely the kind of woman

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

who ought to keep a farm. It is rarely people look their profession. Mrs. Butterworth does. She is plump and apple-cheeked, and smiling and cheery. That she keeps cows and pigs, and horses and geese you would know instinctively at one glance. Her very mouth gives her away. You can see it is in the habit of saying "C—up! c—up! c—up!" when she is desirous that the cows shall come home to be milked. Mrs. Butterworth says "C—up" when Mr. Butterworth and the farm-help are too engaged to say it. Her real province in life is to make butter and bread and look after the house, and "C—up" is only a digression.

"How are you, Miss Hazel? Come in. And how do you do, Mr. Inderwick?" says she, bustling in before us and dusting two, clean, oak chairs.

Mr. Inderwick looks surprised. He has never seen Mrs. Butterworth before in his life, or heard of her till two hours previously.

Then she begins to talk, and tells him many things about his movements and plans and doings that he evidently did not know himself.

"And you are goin' to try sheep. There's many a lot of us as try sheep, and all glad to see the last of their foolish, starin' faces."

He looked puzzled, and passed his hand over his hair.

"How do you mean?" he inquired.

"Well, Mr. Littlewood, your new bailiff, was a-sayin' you were goin' to keep sheep, and Butter-

MR. INDERWICK ACCOMPANIES ME TO GAYTON.

worth he said he didn't envy you, and you'd soon be rare glad to be quit of them," and Mrs. Butterworth poked the fire vigorously.

"Am I going to keep sheep?" he said feebly.

Mrs. Butterworth looked at him a little pityingly.

"Well, you know your own business best. I'm only a-tellin' you what Mr. Littlewood says to me."

"Oh, of course, of course! I remember now. Of course I am going to keep sheep," he remarked hurriedly.

Mrs. Butterworth eyed him with suspicion.

"Perhaps you don't know much about farmin'?"

"No, I don't," he said with relief, "that's a fact. Up to the present I have left things to Littlewood. A good man is Littlewood, Mrs. Butterworth, a very good man."

"Yes," she replied dryly, "Littlewood is a good man, but he wants a head."

"Yes, yes," he answered nervously.

"And you are goin' to learn farmin'?" she went on with firmness.

"Yes," he replied meekly, "I will learn farming."

"That's right," she said heartily. "Nothin' like havin' a good man at the helm in farmin'. For what with contendin' with the Lord's weather which He is pleased to send us when anythink special is on, such as haymakin' and cuttin' the corn, and what with low prices and the markets flooded with American horseflesh and inferior wheat, it takes a farmer all his time to get along and pay his way

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

and have a half-hour to spare to attend a harvest festival. And now," she continued, "you must have a cup of tea, both of you. The kettle's boilin' fit to drive a steam engine."

She brought forth honey, and she brought forth milk, and she brought forth oat-cakes on a steaming hot dish. And a very merry party we were, at least Mrs. Butterworth and I were merry, while Mr. Inderwick was silently cheerful. The red-tiled floor and the old, blue plates and pewter pots on the dresser and mantelshelf were good to look upon, and the old-fashioned, comfortable armchairs very good to sit in.

"But we must go," I said at the end of an hour, "or mother and Angela will be dragging the Puddydale for my body. I am not allowed out after dark."

We returned home through the fields above the shore. The light was fading, and a crescent moon hung in the sky above us. There was a slight touch of frost in the air, just enough to whip up the blood in one's cheeks and cause them to glow.

I chattered and he listened. At last I stopped and said, "Won't *you* talk now for a change? I am tired of my own voice."

"Really?" he asked in such surprise that against my inclination I laughed.

"That is rather nasty of you. Do you think I am such a tremendous chatterbox?"

"Yes," he replied with such conviction that I again laughed.

MR. INDERWICK ACCOMPANIES ME TO GAYTON.

"But I like to hear you," he went on. "Some of what you say is—excuse me—nonsense, but I enjoy it nevertheless."

"Thank you," I said with sarcasm.

"Now please don't get annoyed," he laughed; "that is the worst of women, they are so touchy."

"I was just wondering if it *could* be less than a month I have known you," I observed.

"No, it is much more, it is fourteen years. You forget we first met on the seashore."

He held out his hand to say good-bye.

"Good-night," I said, laughing.

I was half-way up the steps, when he called me back without ceremony.

"One moment. Have you enjoyed our walk?"

"Yes, thanks," I replied, "though you *are* somewhat plain-spoken."

He waved that on one side.

"I have tremendously. We will go another some day soon."

"Will we?"

I felt suddenly nervous.

"Yes," he said. "When could you go? We used to be out a lot together, you will remember."

"I was a little girl then," I said feebly.

"I don't think you are much more now," he replied, regarding me gravely. "Anyway, I will be on the look-out for you. Good-bye!" And then he went away.

CHAPTER XIV.

I TAMPER SUCCESSFULLY WITH A KEYHOLE AND LUNCH AT PIPER'S WELL.

“HOW the months race by!” I said at breakfast this morning, “Can it be possible that December is with us?”

And Angela replied—

“Quite possible, and we must get the raisins stoned to-day for the puddings.”

I wished I had not mentioned the time of the year. Angela might have forgotten it. There was just a ghost of a chance she might have forgotten, for I heard her making plans with mother to visit Susan Potts, who had a thirteenth little Potts yesterday. The Potts's baby was abandoned at once.

“It can wait,” she said.

“But supposing it is delicate, and dies?” I suggested.

I too had been making plans, and certainly stoning raisins had not entered into them. The morning was so beautiful and fresh, that I had felt it would be sinful to spend it in a house with four women and furniture.

I TAMPER SUCCESSFULLY WITH A KEYHOLE.

“I will go off for the day with Dibbs,” I arranged with myself. “We will take a meat pasty and a jam turnover. I will steal them from the larder for our lunch. I will point-blank refuse to do a single thing in the way of housework, and just as Angela is hurrying off to tell mother of my insubordination, I will slip quietly out of the front door and be half-way along Sandy Lane before she can draw breath.”

“It won’t die,” said Angela with decision. “Mrs. Potts’s babies don’t die. And if it did, Mr. Oates should be there as the rector of the parish, and not I.”

“Are there any raisins in the store-cupboard?” I next asked weakly. “I noticed there were not many in the spotted dog pudding we had the other day.”

Angela looked at me in the way I least like of all her looks.

“Spotted dog is never made of raisins. Surely you must know that. Currants only are used, and there were plenty in the pudding. I ordered the raisins for the Christmas puddings and mince-meat a week ago. There are four blue bags on the second shelf in the store-cupboard. Will you kindly get them out while I set Rose and Elizabeth their work for the day. We must have a little extra cleaning done as Christmas is so close at hand.”

“Angela,” I cried eagerly, “couldn’t Rose and Elizabeth help us just for once? We should get

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

through the stoning so quickly if there were four of us at it."

"Certainly not," replied my sister, snapping her jaws together. "They have something else to do. How can you ask such a futile question when you know it takes them all their time to get through the work as it is? Now will you get the raisins and make a start? They will take us at least four or five hours to stone. I am making an extra quantity of mince-meat this year."

I watched her neat figure disappear across the hall and up the staircase. What an unyielding back and determined gait. I knew I might as well argue with a piece of flint. All my life I have been curiously obedient to Angela. She seems to possess some occult power of making me do exactly as she wishes. With other people I can hold my own, but where Angela is concerned I am as weak as dish-water.

My feet dragged me heavily to the store-cupboard in the kitchen. I wished the key would break in the lock, but it turned like greased lightning. Suddenly an inspiration came straight from he—heaven. I am sure it was from heaven, from my comfortable sort of peaceful, happy feeling. Had it been from the other place, surely I should have had twinges of remorse throughout the day, and I can truthfully say I have never had one.

Rose and Elizabeth were upstairs making beds. Angela was also up above doing her duty in some shape or form. Mother was in the garden with

I TAMPER SUCCESSFULLY WITH A KEYHOLE.

Sammy ordering the vegetables. The coast was clear. On tiptoe I crept to the back door, thence to the gravelled walk, from which I selected two tiny pebbles. I had no intention of slinging them at Angela as David did at Goliath. Murder was not in my heart. I was merely going to let them slip into the keyhole of the store-cupboard. I tiptoed back. I held my breath. Then the pebbles seemed of their own accord to walk into the keyhole. The deed was done. Only a locksmith or dynamite could have opened that door. I sat down on the Windsor chair and swayed about with silent laughter. The thought of Angela's face caused me pain. It caught me in the ribs, and I suffered considerably.

Presently I controlled myself sufficiently to call to my sister at the bottom of the stairs the unfortunate news.

"The key won't turn?"

I could hear the surprise in her voice.

"No," I cried; "nothing will make it."

This I knew to be true, and I had no prickings of conscience.

"It's very strange," muttered Angela, as she hurried down the stairs; "let me try."

And she did try. She tried for half an hour, and I helped her. I never helped her so much in my life, and almost felt sorry for her as I saw her worried face.

Mother, Rose, and Elizabeth all came and watched

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

us ; and then they tried in their turn, and worked very hard.

“ Bill Bonnyman must be fetched,” said Angela at length.

“ He is certain to be out,” I ventured ; “ he always is. Shall I go and leave a message for to-morrow ? ”

She reflected for a moment.

“ Yes,” she said at length, “ engage him to come the first thing in the morning. We can’t do the raisins to-day.”

“ Can’t we ? ” I tried to make my voice sound regretful. “ What about getting some village raisins ? ”

“ On no account. They are dreadful, and full of bits of stone and grit.”

I expected this answer, and walked off with a light heart.

I secreted the meat pasty and jam turnover, and then I got ready. Elizabeth was cleaning the steps at the gate as I went out.

“ Elizabeth,” I said, “ will you tell mother I shan’t be in to dinner ? As there are no raisins to stone there is nothing for me to do to-day, so I have seized the opportunity of taking a long walk with Dibbs. He badly wants exercise ; he is getting so fat that I fear apoplexy may overtake him.”

“ Yes, Miss Hazel,” replied Elizabeth, as she rubbed her hearthstone from one side of the wet step to the other.

What I like about Elizabeth is that she never

I TAMPER SUCCESSFULLY WITH A KEYHOLE.

comments upon my movements, as do Sammy and Rose. The latter would have said, "Eh, Miss Hazel, have you forgotten it's the day for putting clean papers on the shelves of the cupboard in the dining-room?" But Elizabeth does not remind me of such trivial matters. She takes a wider view of life. She knows that fresh air and sunshine are much more essential to one's well-being than super-human cleanliness in a remote cupboard.

I watched her as she swayed her body across the steps. My heart warmed to her. What a well-shaped arm she had, and such a kind, refined face.

"Elizabeth," I said carelessly, "you need not say anything about my having gone for a walk for at least an hour. Miss Angela will probably go and see Mrs. Potts's new baby, and that is the way I am going after I have been to the plumber's, and —and I don't care about seeing the baby. You understand?"

"Yes, Miss Hazel," said Elizabeth imperturbably.

"Good-morning, Elizabeth; I shall be back to tea."

"Good-morning, Miss Hazel."

As I walked to the village I decided that a pale-blue silk scarf would suit Elizabeth admirably. Christmas was near, and I would spend two-and-elevenpence on it instead of one-and-elevenpence, the sum I usually expend on presents for the servants.

Bill Bonnyman was in. I stared at him in

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

amazement. The first plumber who has ever been in since the world cooled down sufficiently to support life.

“Are you ill, Bill?” I inquired kindly.

“No, Miss Hazelt. Why should I be ill?”

“Oh, I just thought you might be,” I said.
“There is a good deal of sickness about.”

“No, thank you kindly, I was never better in my life.”

“That’s right. I have come to know when you could call to open the store-cupboard in the kitchen; the key won’t turn, and it’s very awkward not being able to get into it.”

“Why, I can come right away, Miss Hazelt,” he said warmly.

“Oh, don’t hurry, Bill, don’t hurry,” I cried hastily. “To-morrow will do perfectly; it isn’t convenient to-day.”

I felt myself going red, and Bill eyed me in a surprised way.

“Well, it would suit me better to come to-day. I was just waitin’ for a job. To-morrow I am full up. I couldn’t come for two or three days. I’m sorry it don’t suit you to-day.”

“Yes, it’s a pity, Bill; but the fact is, I shall be out, and—and—” I paused in confusion, and Bill’s eyes rounded.

Then I became desperate.

“Look here, Bill,” I said in a low voice, as I slipped a shilling into his hand, “you will probably

I TAMPER SUCCESSFULLY WITH A KEYHOLE.

find something in the keyhole—crumbs or grit, or even a pebble. But I shouldn't say anything about it if I were you ; it—it would only worry Mrs. Wycherley and Miss Angela, and—well, I should keep quiet about it."

I held my breath. I hardly dare look at him. Would he wink and be cheeky ? or would he be respectful and kind and sympathetic ? I knew I had laid myself open to familiarity. I had confided in him, I had bribed him. Some day he might levy blackmail upon me. I shuffled uneasily from one foot to the other ; I gave Dibbs an unexpected caress ; I readjusted my hatpins. Then I stole a glance at him and his right palm. The shilling had disappeared, and he was staring hard at the sunshine. His face was expressionless, his attitude was quite respectful. I could hardly keep myself from hugging him. A duke could not have displayed greater tact or truer refinement of feeling. Bill may be a common village plumber, joiner, carpenter, painter and decorator rolled in one, but he is every inch a gentleman.

" You understand, Bill ? "

" Quite," he replied gravely.

" Good-day, Bill."

" Good-day, Miss Hazelt," and he touched his cap.

I retraced my steps through the village, passed our own gate at a run, and made for Oldfield Common.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

I tried to decide which I loved the better of the two—Elizabeth or Bill. My heart was full to overflowing with the milk of human kindness. I almost wished disaster could overtake them, so that I might be their friend and do kind things for them. I called Dibbs and hugged him hard. He seemed annoyed, and wriggled out of my embrace. He does not like to be kissed when rabbits are knocking about.

What an absolutely perfect, heavenly morning it was. There had been a ground frost the previous night, and the fields and heather sparkled in the sunshine. Under the sheltering hedges the banks were still frozen, but beneath the sun's rays the little sparklets in the middle of the road were rapidly disappearing. The sky was of a brilliant azure, against which the branches and twigs of the bare oaks stood out like black filigree work, motionless in the wonderful stillness of the atmosphere. The Dee lay like a beautiful deep sapphire set about with hills of amethyst, and the air was so full of champagne and other fizzy properties that my feet fairly danced beneath me, and at last I was obliged to run—my legs simply made me—and like an india-rubber ball I bounced across the common with Dibbs snapping wildly at my heels.

I saw someone coming along in the distance—a man! I made my feet stop, and my heart bounced instead. Then I became quite unconcerned and indifferent in my manner. I allowed my gaze to rest upon the beautiful view to my left, and I studied it

I TAMPER SUCCESSFULLY WITH A KEYHOLE.

carefully till I was almost up to the person. Then I raised my eyes in surprise and saw—Job Price, the biggest all-round swearer in Heatherland. I don't know why, but I would have given much at that moment to be a man and pick a quarrel with Job, and perhaps knock him down.

Job is a fisherman, and lives in a white cottage on the shore. The exterior of the cottage is picturesque and wind-blown; the interior is stuffy and full of Job's wife and seventeen children. At one time Mrs. Job and Mrs. Potts had a race as to which should have the largest family in the shortest period, but when Mrs. Job had her third set of twins Mrs. Potts retired gracefully.

Sammy is of the opinion that Job is not the biggest swearer in Heatherland; he says he knows of two who could give him odds with ease, but I differ with him. I once heard Job use the word "bluggy" eleven times in one sentence, and it was not a long sentence either. He was speaking of cockles, and used this horrid-sounding, sanguinary word in reference to them over and over again till at last I began to count. I have wondered since why he troubles to catch or pick cockles when he thinks so meanly of the bivalve.

He opened conversation this morning by remarking, "It's a bluggy fine day, Miss Hazelt."

"Job," I answered severely, "why do you use that dreadful word so much? It's very wicked of you, and some day you'll be struck dead for profanity."

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

To say that Job looked astonished would be putting it mildly.

“Dreadful word! Prerfanity!” he ejaculated. “Whatever is it you are talkin’ about? I don’t use prerfane words, you asks my missus.” Then he became a little hectoring. “Now just you explains what you means. I don’t allow folks to lecture me for nothing, not even Parson Oates. What was the prerfane word? Spit it out.”

Job is dreadfully vulgar, and he had been drinking.

“‘Bluggy,’” I murmured faintly.

I was beginning to be a little nervous. The common is lonely, and the nearest farm was half a mile away.

“‘Bluggy’!” Job shouted. “You call ‘bluggy’ a prerfane word. Why, it’s just a little hinnercent simple sort of word I made up myself. It’s no more prerfane than if I ses ‘Jerusalem.’”

“But what does it mean?”

He hesitated for a moment.

“Well,” he replied at length, “there might be some evil-minded people who would say as it was two bad words run into one. There are lots of those kind of charitable people knocking about—sort of psalm-singing, smooth-tongued folks who wants their quart of ‘bluggy’ cockles full to overflowing, and then grudges the tuppence for ‘em. I know the kind who snivels and spews at a good, honest English word like ‘bluggy’; I would like to put my fist into their ‘bluggy’ faces.”

I TAMPER SUCCESSFULLY WITH A KEYHOLE.

I looked at Job's fist and didn't care for its appearance ; it reminded me of sledge-hammers and boars' heads, and I began to sidle away from it.

"I see, Job. It doesn't mean anything ; it is just a word of your own coining. I am glad it's all right and not a wicked meaning. It certainly hasn't a pretty sound, but of course you can't help that. Lots of words in the English language are not pretty ; take hippopotamus for instance, no one could say that was euphonious. Good-morning, Job. When you have some cockles or mussels to sell call at our house. Good-morning."

I hurried away, and I could feel that he was staring after my retreating figure. No, after all I preferred not to pick a quarrel with Job. I would much rather be his friend.

I was glad when the Oldfield Farm appeared in sight. It had a pleasant, hospitable air about it, and I knew its milk to be the best in Heatherland. I persuaded Miss Swiftly to put me some in a pint bottle, and lend me an old cup. I wanted to lunch out of doors. In addition, she gave me a lovely, freshly-made scone covered with her own fresh butter.

"You are a dear, Miss Swiftly, and I already feel rampageously hungry. I shall go straight away to Piper's Well and picnic there, and on my return journey I will leave you the bottle and cup."

"Don't you trouble, Miss Hazel," she said. "You are quite welcome to them. And you might be going

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

back another way. I hear there is a shooting party over the Durdans, and Mr. Inderwick is there. I'm told you and he are great friends," and she gave a foolish little giggle.

I stared at her for a moment. So village gossip about our walk was evidently in full swing, and had reached as far as Oldfield Farm. How I loathed villagers. What a set of babbling, chattering, gossiping poll-parrots they were. Why couldn't they attend to their own business? I had noticed those ten heads peeping round muslin blinds that day, but then they so often peeped, even when I was quite alone. It was really terribly confining and cramping living in such an atmosphere. I felt stifled and oppressed.

I met Miss Swiftly's inquisitive, amused, quizzical look with a bold front.

"You have been misinformed if you have been told that Mr. Inderwick and I are great friends. I have met him about three times since he came to Heatherland. At present he is an acquaintance. Some day I hope to reckon him as my friend. The village is simply a little premature."

I succeeded in keeping my voice calm and even, but as I walked away I was shaking with temper. My day was spoilt. I walked mechanically to Piper's Well. I sat down and listened to the little babbling noise of the water as it sprang from a grassy bank to the stones below.

"God," I said, "I wish you would destroy the

I TAMPER SUCCESSFULLY WITH A KEYHOLE.

village of Heatherland as you did Sodom and Gomorrah of old with fire and brimstone, and I would fly first to Aunt Menelophe as Lot escaped to Zoar. Of course, too, I should like mother and Angela to be saved. Probably Angela would look back and be turned into a pillar of salt ; and, on the whole, it would not be a bad end for her, or one she would dislike, as it would be so clean and healthy."

Then I ate my meat pasty, and Dibbs prodded me with a gentle paw. We had mouthfuls alternately and sips of the milk. Dibbs enjoyed his lunch, and devoured three-quarters of the scone, but I didn't care for such a gross thing as food. I merely ate to live. My mind was engrossed with sombre thoughts on village life. I think people who write exquisite idylls about simple, primitive, country-folk have never lived in a village, or they couldn't pen such drivel. They probably flop down into one for a week or two's rest to recruit their forces and energy to grapple with the strenuousness of their lives in town. Then they tear back to their big cities and rave about everything : Cows standing knee-deep in lush meadows ; quaint, old-world, thatched cottages ; ducks waddling on village greens ; rustic maidens with pink cheeks, shy eyes and shapes like a Venus de Milo ; dear old simple men and women—every one of them over eighty—sitting dozing and babbling and crooning in the sunshine at their spotless cottage doors ; fragrant, old-fashioned gardens full of sweet-scented lavender bushes, columbines, sweet williams

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

and cockle shells ; the whole land over-flowing with fresh yellow butter, cream, honey and eggs ; no poverty, no sin, no crime ; every inhabitant as guileless as a sleeping kitten.

It is a pretty fancy, and some of it is not purely the outcome of a vivid imagination. We have thatched cottages and columbines and cockle shells by the gross. We have cows and lush meadows and even a few ducks. In addition, we have the Dee with its ceaseless ebb and flow, and the Welsh hills enfolded in their witchery of blue and purple and shadowy grey mists. We have quiet dawns, with the sun creeping up behind the hills, and wondrous golden sunsets, when the Dee is transformed into a river of molten glory. We have fresh butter—at an exorbitant price—and heather, and honey, and eggs at certain periods of the year when the fowls cease moulting and sitting. We have fragrant flowers and many fruits of the earth and beautiful old gardens. We have maidens with pink cheeks, though their eyes are anything but shy, and their shapes resemble oven-bottom loaves. We have old men and women who *very* occasionally sit at their cottage doors, none of them caring too much for fresh air ; but where, oh where, are the dear, simple-minded, guileless ones ? Do innocent, pure-hearted, kindly, selfless, venerable men and women of villages only exist in the pages of a novel, or is my sense of perception void ? Fancy calling Miss Swiftly simple-minded ! But of course she is not old. She may

I TAMPER SUCCESSFULLY WITH A KEYHOLE.

become everything that is desirable by the time she has reached eighty, gossiping, imaginative, old scandal-monger! A village would be the most delightful thing in the world if there were no people in it.

I sat and mused by the well till Dibbs became impatient, and a little shiver ran over me. After all, it was December, and when the sun began to make its first move towards the west the air at once became colder. There was going to be another frost, one could feel it approaching, and the branches of the trees stood motionless as though gathering together all their resources to withstand the enemy. Not a blade of grass or a twig moved; everything was as still as death; only the spring sang and spirtled, and gurgled and tumbled. I rinsed the bottle and cup in the falling water, and bathed my face and hands in its iciness.

“I will go home,” I said out loud.

My desire for a long walk had gone. The glamour and beauty of the day were fading, my spirits were down to zero. I felt that it was hard that the world would not allow me to contract a simple friendship with a man who my instinct told me was of good, solid gold when once you penetrated his rough, outer crust. I had so enjoyed that walk, so appreciated his direct, straight mode of speech, so carried away and impressed with the breadth of his views and simplicity of thought. I had never met anyone who appeared so utterly indifferent to the opinion of his

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

fellow-creatures. Not because he was hide-bound with self-appreciation and egotism or conceit, of that I was sure, for he seemed quite unselfconscious and simple, but because it never appeared to enter his head for one moment that people might be interested in his movements, sayings or doings. What he wanted to do he went straight away and did.

Oh, how I wished that I had been gifted with a like strength of character. Why should I consider the world's opinion of me, so long as I did what I knew to be harmless? The world did nothing for me. Why should I give up my walks with Mr. Inderwick to please it? I knew, too, that I should *really* please it much more if I continued them. That was the point. Heatherland would be down on me to a woman if I were again seen with him alone; but if I were not the savour would be gone out of their lives. I realised that this savour would be no longer provided by me. I don't think I am of that type of girl who is never so happy as when she is causing a sensation. In theory I glory in the thought of defying all the narrow conventionalities of society. I bristle with bravery in the privacy of my room. Put me in the full glare of public opinion, and under the pitiless gaze of the women of the village, and I am simply abject.

I shook out my skirts, and metaphorically thrust Mr. Inderwick out of my path. He must go. He had said, "We will have many walks together." He was a dense man; he didn't understand things.

I TAMPER SUCCESSFULLY WITH A KEYHOLE.

“Come along, Dibbs, my friendship with Mr. Inderwick is off,” I said, and we started down the field for the shore, as I intended returning home that way, and would give Miss Swiftly her bottle and cup some other day.

We had gone about a hundred yards, when I heard a shout behind. Someone was calling my name. It was Mr. Inderwick’s voice, but I wouldn’t hear. I stumped firmly along, for had I not just decided that our friendship must cease? We must only in future meet as ordinary acquaintances in drawing-rooms.

Again he called, and this time in a somewhat peremptory fashion, “Miss Hazel, wait a minute.”

But still I would not hear. Probably Heatherland had secured, at that very moment, a lighthouse from somewhere, and was sitting up in it with telescopes and field-glasses surveying the landscape.

“Miss Hazel, are you stone-deaf?”

This was rude, and he must be told so. I turned round slowly, and watched his approach. As he came nearer I observed he was limping, and that his mouth was set as though in pain.

“What’s the matter?” I asked quickly.

“Oh, I have hurt my ankle—given it a bit of twist—and racing after you has not improved it. Were you walking for a wager?”

He sounded cross, but I could see he was in pain, so I answered gently—

“Sit down on this stile for a minute and unlace

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

your boot? How did it happen? And why have you raced after me, when every step has probably injured you seriously? You should have gone to Miss Swiftly's."

"I did, and she told me you were at the Well, so I came after you."

"But that was very unwise. A twisted ankle is not a thing to play with."

"Look here," he interrupted, "don't begin to preach. It's not hurt badly—no sprain or anything serious—and I thought we could go home together. Miss Swiftly is lending me her trap, and perhaps you would like a lift."

"No, thanks," I said stiffly; "I am returning by the shore."

"But need you? Couldn't you just as well come with me, and I would take you a bit of a drive first?"

His tone was eager, and the offer was tempting. Drives didn't often come my way. He sat down and began to unlace his boot, and his mouth screwed up as though it hurt him.

"Will you?" he said again.

"No, I can't."

"Why not? Don't you like driving?"

"Very much."

"Well, then, why not come? You will be quite safe with me. I am accustomed to everything in the shape of horseflesh. You needn't be nervous."

I TAMPER SUCCESSFULLY WITH A KEYHOLE.

“I am not,” I replied sharply. “I am not nervous of anything.”

“Oh well, then, that’s settled,” he said calmly. “Deuce, how my ankle’s swollen! Just look.”

I looked, and it was certainly very puffy and fat. He regarded it ruefully.

“That’s through not looking before you leap. I jumped over a pretty stiff fence and landed in a rabbit hole. I was shooting with some men over the Durdans, and pretty nearly shot myself.”

“You are too big and heavy to go vaulting fences like a schoolboy,” I commented severely. “I don’t know how you are going to get home.”

“I do,” he answered composedly. “It is not so bad as all that. It looks worse than it is. I shall just ask you to be so good as to give me a bit of help across this field to the farm, and the rest will be easy.”

“I am afraid I shan’t be much use. I am not very strong.”

“Yes, excuse me, you are. You are the strongest young lady I have met. And now may I lean on your shoulder? I am sorry to trouble you, but I won’t bear more heavily than I can help.”

He did so without further formality. He was still without his boot, and limped along in his stocking foot.

“We might be Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester,” I began, then I could have bitten out my tongue.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"Yes, only you will perhaps remember Jane was kind and sympathetic," he said, turning and looking into my face with a smile.

"I think I have been extremely sympathetic," I retorted.

"Indeed! I was just at the moment reflecting I had rarely met with anyone who seemed more bored at doing a little kindness."

"I am not bored," I flashed out, "only——"

"Only what?"

I was mute. I could not tell him that though greatly enjoying the situation, I was convinced that telescopes were being turned on to us from various points of Heatherland, and that behind each sat a woman, a woman with an inordinate love of gossip and an imagination as vivid as the noonday sun.

"Only what?" he repeated.

I wriggled in spirit. What a persistent man he was! And it was so difficult to tell lies beneath that steady gaze.

"I have my reasons," I said at length doggedly.

"Yes, so I suppose, and I am trying to get at them. You were so nice and friendly the other day, and we had such a jolly walk, and now—well, now you treat me as though I were a stranger, and instead of offering the cup of cold water you pass over to the other side. And it is not very nice of you, considering you are religious."

I could not help laughing at his tone.

I TAMPER SUCCESSFULLY WITH A KEYHOLE.

"But I am not religious. I am dreadfully wicked. If you only knew what I had done to-day," and I told him about the keyhole.

He chuckled for a few minutes.

"Yes, I think you are pretty wicked," he said, "but at the same time I fancy you are religious. You never miss saying your prayers or reading your Bible morning and night, or going to church; and you give to the poor, and to missionaries, and waifs and strays; and you go to sewing meetings, and visit your district, and read to blind women.. Don't you?"

"But that is not being religious. Surely you must know that? Those are all mere empty works which are void without faith and love. And I have no love for any of them. I hate the lot. I only do these things from a sense of duty, and to please mother and Angela."

"Then all the more credit due to you," he said gravely. "When people take up work which is thoroughly distasteful to them, and go through with it bravely and honestly, they are on the right track for heaven, to my thinking."

"I don't know," I said, sighing. "I believe I do it in the hope of securing a tiny corner for myself in the next world, and because I am really sorry for poor people."

"And they adore you."

How comforting he was. I did not stop to inquire how he had discovered such a startling and comfort-

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

able fact—if it were a fact. I just stroked myself down gently. How lovely it was to know that somebody adored me. I always feel at my best with Mr. Inderwick.

We had reached the farmyard. The horse and trap stood waiting, and Miss Swiftly ogled at us from the doorway. I gave her the cup and bottle, and, turning to Mr. Inderwick, held out my hand.

“Good-bye,” I said a little stiffly. I fancied I saw four ears on Miss Swiftly’s head instead of two, and they all pointed our way as a setter points at his quarry.

But he took no notice of it. My palm embraced the air while he busied himself with the rug.

“Now will you get in, Miss Hazel?” he said, offering me his hand as cool as a cucumber. “Just stand up a moment while I tuck the rug round you; that’s it. Good-day, Miss Swiftly. Many thanks. My man shall bring back the trap this evening. You say you won’t be wanting it. Hope I shall be able to do you a similar kindness some day without the strained ankle thrown in. Good-day.” And we rattled across the cobbles of the yard and down the narrow lane, with its hedge of furze bushes, followed by Miss Swiftly’s starting eyes and extended ears, and the wide grin of a hulking stable-boy.

What we said, and how we disagreed, and where we drove to must be reserved for another day, for I must go down to supper. The gong has gone twice, and I *must* meet mother and Angela sooner or later.

I TAMPER SUCCESSFULLY WITH A KEYHOLE.

I wish it could be later. There is bound to be a lecture. I slipped in and up the stairs without making a sound. Yet I know they are aware of my presence in the house, or why sound the gong twice? Angela has never been late for a meal in her life. So I must take my courage in my hands and gird up my loins to withstand the onslaught of the enemy.

The drive was worth it all.

CHAPTER XV.

ON THE REPAIRING OF A LOCK AND MY DRIVE WITH MR. INDERWICK.

BILL BONNYMAN has just finished repairing the lock of the store-cupboard door. When the last screw was removed, and the lock was being gently shaken about in Bill's large hand, I deftly slipped in between it and Angela. She did not hear the rattle of a tiny pebble on the floor, and if she did, it would be from Bill's boot.

"What was it, Bill? Why wouldn't the key turn?" she asked with interest.

"A bit of dirt, miss. P'r'aps something out of your pocket which stuck in the little hole at the top end of the key."

"I don't have dirty pockets, Bill," she said with dignity. "Besides, I don't carry the key there. It is attached to the chatelaine at my waist."

"Ah well, miss! Keyholes often pick up a bit of dirt. It's a habit they have," and Bill prepared to go.

"Couldn't Bill have a glass of beer, Angela?" I whispered.

She looked at me in surprise.

THE REPAIRING OF A LOCK.

“Mother never gives beer to anyone.”

“She does to the carpet-shakers in the spring and autumn cleanings.”

“That is different. She is obliged to. It is the custom in Heatherland—sixpence a corner and a glass of beer each. But there is no occasion for Bill to have it; he is paid for his work.”

“But he is so kind and nice,” I persisted.

“That is not sufficient reason for giving a man beer,” she said in her most final tones.

I followed Bill to the back door and slipped twopence into his hand.

“That is for beer, Bill.”

“Thank you kindly, miss, but I’m teetotal.”

Once again Bill caused me to gasp. First he was in when as a plumber he should have been out, and now he was teetotal. I did not know there was a teetotal man in Heatherland. I watched him down the walk and into Sandy Lane. I felt fond of Bill. I owed my lovely drive to him. But for his sympathy yesterday I should have been miserable and felt bound to return to Angela and confess my crime; his tacit acquiescence to keep quiet and say nothing encouraged me to brazen the whole thing out, and I was rewarded for my temerity. My day more than equalled expectations, especially the evening part of it, and the drive with Mr. Inderwick.

Of course the weather was exceptionally fine, and I am sure there were more stars than usual in the sky. One great big one shot into the blue almost

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

before the red and gold in the west had faded and died. Then another appeared. And then, as if by magic, the whole lot of them came upon the scene—big and little, fixed stars and planets—and they twinkled and winked, and sparkled and glittered till the heavens seemed fairly alive with their glimmering eyes. They appeared, I thought, to be winking at us. Supposing Mrs. Oates were seated in one of them and Angela in another. I shuffled uneasily. There was still time to get down and go home alone. We had not got very far from Heatherland, though it was rapidly retreating behind us. This was what Mr. Inderwick called making a little *détour*.

I summoned all my courage, and duty and well-brought-upness and good, moral training to my aid, and demanded to be set down immediately.

Mr. Inderwick instantly became deeply interested in Dibbs' movements behind us, and whistled to him loudly.

“He is all right,” I said. “Will you put me down at once? I did not argue before Miss Swiftly, but I have no intention of going a drive with you.”

We covered quite another quarter of a mile before he replied—

“I am sorry you have changed your mind. You are a little wobbly. I thought in the fields you decided you would go.”

“I never did,” I cried hotly. “I had not the slightest intention of driving *one* yard with you.”

THE REPAIRING OF A LOCK.

“Why are you here, then?”

I could have shaken him. Of all the exasperating men in the world! First he mastered me, then he called me wobbly. Such impertinence! It was gross.

“Mr. Inderwick,” I said, “you may think you are being funny. It does not strike me that way. I call your behaviour ungentlemanly, ill-bred, and cruel. To kidnap a defenceless girl on the public highway is not a very creditable piece of work.”

I glowered at him as I spoke, expecting him to pull the horse on to its haunches in his shame and sorrow, and I could hardly believe my own senses—either sight or hearing—when his lips twitched and he finally broke into such chuckling that his great shoulders heaved up and down like young earthquakes.

That settled it. I was really angry.

“Mr. Inderwick, if you have one particle of manly or gentlemanly feeling in you—and I am beginning to doubt if you have—may I appeal to it, once again, and request you to stop the horse and allow me to get down.”

I hardly realised that we had passed West Kirby and were a good four miles from home, and that it was now quite dark but for the glimmering light of the stars.

He pulled up the horse, and handed me down without speaking.

“Good-night,” I said freezingly as I turned on

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

my heel and set off down the hard road at a good speed.

“Wait a bit,” he called after me. “If you will allow me, I will keep just behind you in the trap. It is not safe for you to be on these lonely roads at this time of night.”

I vouchsafed no answer. The thing was becoming farcical. The horse’s hoofs clinked, and the wheels rumbled slowly immediately in my rear. When I hurried, they hurried; when I slowed down, they slowed down. A match struck and a fragrant whiff of tobacco curled along the sharp air. A man could always find comfort in his pipe; and there he was seated cosily and comfortably under the warm rug, while I was out in the cold, chill air. I felt exceedingly sorry for myself. Men were so selfish. And I had had no tea, and was dreadfully hungry and very tired, and I had still two more miles to walk.

“Have you nearly had enough, Miss Hazel?”

The voice was quite gentle, though I fancied I could still detect a trace of amusement in it, and my back stiffened.

“Miss Hazel, I want to say something to you, and I can’t if you tear on like that. Won’t you stop a minute?”

The voice was almost supplicating this time, and a stone in my boot was hurting me.

“Well?”

“Oh, don’t say ‘well!’ like that. You quite frighten me. You sound like an iceberg, and I am

THE REPAIRING OF A LOCK.

so helpless with my lame foot. Just stop one minute. The horse is getting quite out of breath."

I was glad that the darkness covered up my smile. I stopped quite suddenly, and the horse almost walked over me.

"And now you are trying to commit suicide," he remarked plaintively. "I think women are a little unreasonable, don't you?"

"Unreasonable!" I flashed.

"Yes. But I don't say *you* are. I was only generalising. This keen air is conducive to thought and philosophy."

"May I ask if you called me back to listen to your prosings on women?"

"That sounds a little unkind," he said. "No, I wanted to tell you how sorry I am for being so ungentlemanly and ill-bred and—what was the other thing? cruel, wasn't it?—and for kidnapping you. I never meant to kidnap you, I assure you. And I am really sorry that my manner led you to think I had such an object in view. The fact is, I was so keen on taking you for a drive—you seem so fond of the fresh air and country and such things—that I forgot *your* feelings in the matter. And there is a jolly little place in West Kirby where you can get tea and hot muffins, and—well, I thought what a nice time we would have, the same as the other afternoon; and there are such a lot of stars, and the roads are so good, and—it's quite early. And this place is sort of Japanesey—all odd and pretty."

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"And what about your ankle? I thought it hurt you, and you have no boot on."

"Oh, I forgot that. But it doesn't hurt much now, and I could easily have hobbled into the tea-room, and the muffins are so hot and buttery, and——"

"Don't!" I groaned. "I am absolutely ravenous."

"Are you? Poor child!" he said in the most beautifully sympathetic voice I ever heard. "I *am* sorry. But we should be back there in ten minutes if you got in the trap at once. It is quite early, and I promise to take you in by half-past six. I know Mrs. Wycherley is particular, but she won't mind your being with me, of course, when I have known you for fourteen years. I will take good care of you."

He was helping me in as he spoke, and my last fragment of indecision oozed out of my heels. He was so sensible and matter-of-fact and practical, that I wondered how I could have been so fussy about such a trifle. I was tired, too, and very hungry. I did not like the sensation, I must admit, of having been conquered by this determined man. But there are moments in one's life when one must show a fine spirit and give in. Only really broad-minded people give in; narrow, petty souls always remain obstinate, but they call it by another name—firmness.

And Mr. Inderwick was not blatantly triumphant over his victory. I will give him credit for showing a nice, humble feeling. He talked of every-day events in an every-day voice as we drove back to

THE REPAIRING OF A LOCK.

West Kirby, and he helped me to get down as respectfully as if I had been the Empress of all the Russias.

The tea-room was all he had promised—odd and pretty and Japanesy. Quaint Oriental curtains were drawn across the windows, so Mrs. Oates and Angela could not peep in upon us from their respective stars.

Stimulated by the tea, I soon forgot my qualms and became cheerful and talkative, while he relapsed into his customary attentive silence and prolonged, fixed staring. I don't think he is aware of this bad, disquieting habit. Some day when I know him better I must tell him of it. It is not good manners.

I felt it was my duty, too, to point out to him that it had been rude and untrue to call me "wobbly."

"Well, aren't you?" he said, smiling. "I thought all girls were."

"Your knowledge of girls has apparently been small," I replied. "Girls have plenty of—of character."

"Oh, have they?" he said, looking surprised.

"You do not amuse me," I observed, glancing at the clock and springing to my feet at the same instant.

"Now don't get fussy," he said quietly. "I promised you should be in by half-past six, and you shall. You seem to be under the impression that not a single affair of the nation, either public or private, can be managed without your assistance, and it is

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

such a mistake on your part. You must have faith in people."

Then he called for the bill and limped slowly after me to the door, followed by the astonished eyes of the girl, who evidently thought the sight of a brown stocking foot at the end of a leather legging rather unusual.

"How is your ankle?" I inquired, as he stood on the cold pavement on one leg.

"Nicely, thank you. It doesn't hurt much, but it is pretty swollen and very cold."

"You should have gone straight home. I expect you will be laid up for weeks."

"Probably, but I've risked it. I like being with you—somehow."

"Thanks. But I think the 'somehow' was a little unnecessary."

I could feel him smiling as he touched up the horse.

"Tell me why you like being with me?" I asked, with that interest which a woman invariably displays in her own personality. I can only get mother and Angela to discuss me on rare occasions, and then in a way I do not always care about.

"You are so vivid, so terrifically in earnest about everything; you take yourself so seriously."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, for instance, you are so affected by the Parian jugs, and the little monotonous details which are bound to enter into most people's lives. They

THE REPAIRING OF A LOCK.

chafe and fret you so. Don't think I am not sympathetic about them, I think the small worries of life are the hardest to bear, for there are so many of them. But I think you feel them more than you should. You are nervous and highly strung. And then haven't you rather exaggerated to yourself the friendly interest which Miss Swiftly and possibly a few other villagers are evidently taking at the moment in us? It pleases them—their lives are dull—and won't harm you and me."

I sat dumb-founded. My tongue clicked in my dry mouth, but no sound came. So he was not blind or dense as I had imagined. He had known all the time my reason for not wishing to drive with him. He was aware that our names, his and mine, were being bandied together about the village, and he spoke as calmly of it as he would speak of the weather.

"How did you know?" I inquired at length faintly. "Did—did Miss Swiftly say anything?"

"Oh, no," he said cheerfully. "But I had not been in her kitchen two minutes before she told me you were down the farm fields at Piper's Well. Within two more minutes she again gave me the same pleasing information. This was followed by your refusing to hear me, then to drive with me, and your general unsympathetic aggressiveness. Miss Swiftly's vacuous smile as we drove away caused me to see daylight, and I soon found that two and two made four."

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

He allowed the horse to fall into a walk, and turned and looked at me searchingly.

My cheeks burnt, and I blessed the night for having fallen and the moon for staying in another part of the world.

"I thought you were blind and absent-minded, and did not see things," I presently murmured nervously.

"I am not blind or absent-minded where *you* are concerned," he said with great decision. "You have shaken me up and sharpened my faculties in an astonishing way."

"And you are pretty heavy and solid and old to shake up," I said flippantly and still more nervously. "You remind me of an Early Victorian feather-bed which has become lumpy."

"I am not old," he replied, a little irritably. "How you carp on one's age!" and he flicked at the horse with his whip, causing it to break into a gallop.

"Do I?" I said in surprise, becoming calmer. "I am sorry. Have I ever mentioned it before?"

"Frequently," he answered.

"That is not true. But, you see, you seemed *quite* old to me when I was a little girl, and naturally it strikes me you are still older now."

"All people who are grown up appear old to children. They rarely distinguish between twenty-five and fifty-five. As a matter of fact, when you were seven I was twenty-one—a mere slip of a youth in my second year at the 'Varsity.'

THE REPAIRING OF A LOCK.

“ You were never a slip,” I replied firmly. “ You were big and grave and slow, and you seemed like forty at the very least, even in those days.”

“ Well, I wasn’t,” he snapped still more irritably. “ Try and disabuse your mind of that misconception. I am still five years short of forty. Perhaps I appear seventy to you to-night ? ”

“ No, I should say not more than seven—if that.”

He gave a grunt, and then we both laughed.

“ If you knew my reason for not caring to drive with you,” I said bravely, “ don’t you think you were a bit of a bully ? ”

“ No,” he replied. “ To consider such infernal rot betokens a weakness of character.”

“ Your language is anything but weak,” I commented severely.

“ I beg your pardon, but I feel strongly about it. If one is always pandering to the world’s opinion you may as well shut up shop, or become a drivelling nincompoop. I don’t mean to grovel at its feet. I intend to enjoy life.”

“ I see. And does enjoying life mean compelling people to go drives with you ? ”

“ Certainly.”

I had nothing to say to that, and a silence fell upon us.

As we swung down the lane to our gate he said—

“ Is your man anywhere about, I wonder, to hold the horse ? ”

“ Why ? ” I asked.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"I want to go in with you for a minute to explain to Mrs. Wycherley that you have been good enough to go for a drive with me."

"Go in?"

"Yes. Why not? It seems only fair to you and Mrs. Wycherley."

"But you can't. You mustn't on *any* account."

"Why not?" he asked wonderingly.

"Oh, I couldn't think of it. It's impossible. They would be flabbergasted. And Angela may have been washing her head and be drying it in the dining-room. She often does in winter to save a fire in her bedroom."

"And do you do the same?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Well, I would call if I could just fix on the night. I would like to see your hair down, it is so dark and fluffy."

"Mr. Inderwick, I must say 'Good-night.'"

"Wait a minute. I don't know how I am to fix it up."

"Fix what up?"

"Why, I wanted to ask Mrs. Wycherley if you might drive with me to the meet next week, and perhaps Miss Angela could come too."

I sat down on the step and fairly heaved with surprise.

"You are an *astonishing* person, Mr. Inderwick. Mother would no more dream of allowing it than she would permit us to dress up in men's clothes and go round Heatherland with a barrel-organ."

THE REPAIRING OF A LOCK.

“Wouldn’t she—not if I came in with you and asked her?”

“Certainly not. She would think you raving mad.”

He whistled for a moment reflectively.

“Well, would she if I asked her to come too? You and Miss Angela perhaps wouldn’t mind sitting at the back one way, and——”

“And the other?”

“Oh, the other! Well, it would be a little difficult to arrange. Can Miss Angela drive?”

“No, she can’t; and in my wildest moment of derangement I cannot fancy mother at a meet.”

“I’m sorry. When can you come to tea again?”

“Never.”

“Haven’t they forgiven you about the Parian jugs?”

“No.”

“That’s a nuisance. It looks as though I can’t fix it up any way, and I should like to see you again before I go away.”

“Are you going away?”

I tried and believe I kept the consternation out of my voice, but I went all sort of blank inside.

“Yes, I’m going for a fortnight at Christmas.”

“How jolly!” I ejaculated.

“Do you think so? I would much prefer staying at Heatherland. I regard it as an unmitigated nuisance. Seven children in the house—my brother’s—and the entire place packed with

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

Christmas - trees, dolls, wooden horses, trains, soldiers, ducks, and sticky fingers. The children themselves horribly over-fed and with a rapacious desire and hankering after 'presents from uncle,' and the parents apologetic and pulpy."

I laughed.

"Well, good-night, you have my sympathy."

"Good-night; I'm sorry you won't let me come in."

He picked up the reins and watched me as I ran up the steps to the gate. After I had closed it, I popped my head over and whispered in a low voice—

"You have never returned mother's and Angela's call, and they think it frightfully ill-mannered of you."

Then I slipped noiselessly across the lawn, into the house, and up to my room.

What a nice man he was I reflected as I brushed my hair. So jolly and friendly and brotherly, and not a scrap of nonsense about him. And showed such thoroughly nice feeling to want to come in and explain matters to mother. Very few men would have suggested such a step. I felt I had found a real friend at last. What a pity it was because a silly world talked that we could have no more good times together. And he was going away, too, and Heatherland would be again flat and dull. I wished Aunt Menelophe would invite me to spend Christmas with her. But mother wouldn't permit it even if such an invitation came. We must always spend

THE REPAIRING OF A LOCK.

Christmas together. It is the season of the year when I feel more than usually fond of Angela.

I went down to supper, and mother shook her head at me very gravely as I took my place at the table. Angela cast a pale-blue eye on me, and then ignored me as completely as she does beggar-women. She does not approve of beggar-women; she says they could all get charring if they tried.

Towards the end of the meal she addressed me at some length. The Welsh-rabbit may have lubricated her throat. She spoke of selfishness and callousness, and disobedience and shirking my duty, and all sorts of sins mentioned in Jeremy Taylor. I listened to her without replying. Her conversation always maintains the same high level of elocutionary ability, but it lacks originality. Mother's is much more interesting, and I pay her the most attention.

After mother had read prayers and about Daniel in the den of lions, I thought I too would be a Daniel. So, taking my courage in my hands, I told them of my drive with Mr. Inderwick and our tea at West Kirby.

Figuratively speaking, Angela's arms and legs lay in different parts of the room, as limbs have a way of doing after the explosion of bombshells; and mother's cap leapt farther to the side of her head.

I sat down gently on the edge of a chair and awaited events.

Mother was the first to pull herself together. She folded her hands, and I rose and respectfully put her

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

cap straight. It was unseemly that mother should be about to speak as a parent to an erring child, wearing such a rakish aspect. I appreciate the fitness of things.

Angela extinguished the candle she had lit preparatory to going to bed, and took up her knitting.

I felt as though it were Act I., Scene 2. Wilful daughter. Dutiful daughter. Heavy parent. I wondered idly what Act II. and III. would reveal.

The heavy parent was much briefer and more sympathetic than I anticipated. Mother is often most delightfully unexpected. Did she remember she herself had once been young? And did she remember hiding in an undignified position behind a coal cart with father to escape the stern paternal eye of Grandfather Ridgewood?

I ventured respectfully to recall this little situation to her, and she said, after a momentary embarrassment, that it had been ill-judged of father to repeat such a foolish story.

“Besides, Hazel,” she added, “it is the duty of children to forget those things which parents in occasional moments of expansion may reveal to them. Children should ever be blind to the faults of their parents and never remember anything they may tell them.”

“If you really mean that,” I said, laughing, “I shall go for another drive with Mr. Inderwick tomorrow.”

“Oh, Hazel, Hazel!” said mother with a deep

THE REPAIRING OF A LOCK.

sigh. "What a trial you are to your sister and me! All our efforts to make you a refined, well-bred woman seem to be unavailing. You confess to having stood at the gate talking to Mr. Inderwick for at least ten minutes. Fancy a child of mine behaving like a common kitchen-maid! If Mr. Inderwick desires to see you he must come—well, he must come here. You are no longer a little girl, as he evidently imagines."

"He doesn't," I said, feeling annoyed. "And he wanted to come in, but I wouldn't let him."

"Why not?" they cried together.

"Oh, I said it wouldn't be convenient, as probably you had both been washing your heads and would be drying them in the dining-room."

The last I saw of mother and Angela they were sitting, with their jaws dropped, staring into the fire.

CHAPTER XVI.

I AM A LITTLE POORLY, AND MR. INDERWICK CALLS.

A STORM is raging over Heatherland. The wind is sweeping and tearing round the house, and booming away in the tree-tops, and wailing down the chimneys, and sobbing under the doors. Great hailstones keep dashing against my window and dancing about on the garden walks like things demented. The monkey trees are waving their long arms about with Ophelian gestures, and the chestnuts near the gate groan and sway as if in mortal agony.

I love a storm—when I am securely tucked away in a house. I like to watch our gentle, placid little Dee churning and lashing itself up into a miniature sea, and the great inky clouds rushing across the leaden sky. To stand close to the window and laugh at the savage hail straining to get at you, and watch the sleet driving in a blinding sheet across the fields, how exhilarating it is! And to lie warm and snug in bed on wild winter nights and listen—listen to all that is going on outside—the rain and wind, and snow and sleet—and to

MR. INDERWICK CALLS.

snuggle the eiderdown more closely round you and know that none of them can get at you, how comforting !

Heroines in introspective novels appear to have such curious sensations with regard to storms, and do such unexpected things. They hang out of windows, or go for long walks on cliffs, and feel like wild birds, and want to be carried away by the tempest and lose themselves in the whirling atmosphere. I am so glad such feelings do not overtake me; they must be extremely uncomfortable. I enjoy a storm as much as anyone—in reason; but I never feel like a wild bird or want to do anything rash. I am quite content to be in my room with a nice bright fire. Yes, I have a fire—the first since I had measles, when I was fifteen. I have worked very hard for it. When I woke I was seized with an earnest longing to spend the day in my room and have a fire. For some time I cudgelled my brains as how to achieve it. Angela would never consent on account of the extra work for Rose. “Have a sore throat”; the voice seemed to come from the neighbourhood of the washstand, and I sat up in bed and stared. What a brilliant idea!

Soon I was hastening down the passage in my dressing-gown and slippers to mother’s room. She was not up, and I could just see the end of her nose peeping forth from her mountainous feather bed. When she gets into bed she looks as though she were climbing up the side of a house.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"Mother," I said, "may I have breakfast in bed to-day? I am a little bit poorly—my throat _____"

She started up and surveyed me anxiously from beneath her red damask canopy. My conscience gave a nasty undesirable twinge.

"Oh, I'm not very bad," I said hastily. "Would you like to look down my throat?"

This was a safe invitation. Mother can't look down throats properly, she gets the spoon all mixed up with your tongue.

"Go back to bed at once," she said by way of reply. "You'll catch your death of cold; it is a bitter morning, and there is scarlet fever in the village. I will come to you later."

I stole guiltily back and huddled under the clothes. I could hear her calling Angela, and telling Rose to bring up a teaspoon from the pantry. I felt wretched, and wondered what I should do. Could I swallow some pink tooth powder? I put such an unworthy thought from me. Mother and Angela arrived with the spoon together.

"Now hold your tongue well down," said Angela.

"I would rather mother looked," I wailed frantically.

They exchanged glances.

"She looks flushed," said mother; "give the spoon to me."

She hurt a good deal, and made me choke violently.

MR. INDERWICK CALLS.

“Of course, if you rear your tongue up in that way, Hazel, it is quite impossible for me to see,” said mother at length, a little irritably.

I was trying not to laugh, and buried my head under the clothes. When I felt it was safe to emerge I whispered faintly I was not very bad and would get up. There was a heroism in my voice which even touched Angela.

“No,” she said, “lie still, and Rose shall bring up your breakfast and light the fire.” She began to remove the pink shavings from the fireplace as she spoke.

My conscience gave another mighty leap. How I wished I had kept to the straight, narrow path! But it was too late, Rose was already appearing with the breakfast-tray.

“I will get up after a while and sit in my room, Angela,” I volunteered amiably.

“Not until after dinner; the room will be thoroughly warm by then,” she replied decisively as she went out and closed the door.

I did not in the least enjoy my breakfast: cold draughts whistled round my back, and crumbs got down the bed, and the fire smoked—the chimney was damp. I was not allowed a book, my arms must not be exposed. Altogether I spent a wretched, dull morning. I counted the moments, when I might get up. Mother paid me three visits, and each time she inquired how I felt. On the first occasion she brought me hot black-currant vinegar,

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

which was very soothing; on the second, a box of jujubes; and on the third, her second-best, woolly, white shawl. She was very kind and sympathetic, and feeling absolutely abject, I could only squeeze her hand.

As soon as I had swallowed my dinner, which was "light diet for an invalid" (boiled mutton), I leapt out of bed, and was dressed and sitting in mother's shawl before a lovely fire as Angela came into the room. She inquired if I did not think it a little rash, and I replied that I was sure I should take no harm from it, and *must* harden myself preparatory to leaving the room on the morrow. She said, "Do you think you will be well enough to go down to-morrow?" and I answered I thought I should. And I think I shall, though I *have* enjoyed this afternoon tremendously, and feel quite comfortable about my deceit. The room is lovely and warm and comfy now. I have stuffed my dressing-gown along the bottom of the door where the carpet lifts with the wind, and I have piled up the fire till it glows red and hot, and, with my chair between the fireplace and window, I can sit with my feet toasting on the fender, and my eyes on the whirling elements outside.

I can see Sammy sheltering in the doorway of the potting-shed preparatory to making a dash across the white, frozen lawn. It is too cold for the hail to melt, and it lies in hard lumps. He has a sack pinned round his shoulders, and his beard straggles

MR. INDERWICK CALLS.

in thin wisps on his chest. He looks very miserable and cold and pinched. Poor old Sammy! I must wave to him.

* * * * *

I opened the window two inches, and told Sammy to go to the kitchen and have some tea with Rose and Elizabeth. They have theirs early, sensible women; we have to wait for ours till five. And they have theirs on a nice little round, wooden table in front of the fire and we have ours laid at the end of the big table in the middle of the dining-room, right away from the fire. When I have a house of my own I shall do things so differently. I shall have a fire in the drawing-room every day. It won't look a bit like a drawing-room; every chair will be easy, and there will be nothing useless. I shall go to it the minute after meals, and so escape the lingering odour of cabbage and potatoes, and the bisselling of the crumbs from off the carpet. Bissells are such exasperating things. They trundle across the carpet with a squeak, dislodge you from your chair because your feet are resting on a few square inches of floor-covering which may contain crumbs, dance in and out of the furniture like Sir Roger de Coverley, and finally hound you out of the room. I wonder how many times I have escaped from their clutches to the garden or my own bedroom? And mother and Angela love bissells!

Now I am going to have a good read. I have not

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL

much choice, as my bookshelf is mainly filled with religious works presented by mother and Angela to me on my different birthdays. They have always had this unfortunate taste in literature. On my sixth birthday Angela started me with *Morning Bells* and *Evening Thoughts*. It was chilly work on a winter's night spelling out the *Evening Thoughts* by the light of a solitary candle, Angela keeping me well in view for fear I might skip a portion. The book was divided up into three hundred and sixty-five thoughts, and some of them were drearier than others; my own by contrast were the reflections of a master-mind.

At ten years of age I received *Gold Dust*, the binding of which was pretty and looked well in the bookcase. Then I was passed on by degrees to Keble's *Christian Year*, *Daily Thoughts for the Young* (these were thoughts for morning as well as evening), *Being and Doing*, *Advice to Young Christians*, and Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Holy Dying*. Jeremy I like the best of the lot; he is a dear.

In addition to these religious volumes I have a few secular ones. First of all, and prime favourite with me as a child and even grown up, is *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice has ever been my best friend. When Angela snubbed me Alice comforted me. She sat with me in the sunny garden and suggested mad tea-parties, with Sammy as the hatter, which honour he always politely declined. She went to the shore

MR. INDERWICK CALLS.

with me, and Dibbs and I "set to partners" on the yellow sands and sang—

"Will you, won't you?
Will you, won't you?
Won't you join the dance?"

She was my companion in the fields and on the commons while Dibbs and I searched for the white rabbit. She tucked herself into bed with me at night, and peeped at me in alluring fashion in the early morning. Where I went she went, never failing to bring me pleasure and absorbing interest; and here's to your health and long life, dear Alice—in black-currant vinegar—and may you bring much simple happiness to millions of children now and in the ages to come!

Next to Alice, I have held steadfast in my regard *Jane Eyre*, *The Cloister and the Hearth*, and *The Moonstone*, three enchanting books. When mother and Angela are present I say I like Scott and Lytton and Thackeray—they are standard authors, and I am bound to like them—and privately I adore *The Newcomes*. They think it shows an uneducated taste to prefer Wilkie Collins to Lytton. Angela is frequently suggesting I shall read something to improve my mind—Carlyle, Ruskin, Schiller, Goethe. Now, if there is anything I detest it is an improving-to-your-mind book. I don't think on the face of the earth there is anything more dreary. I tried a bit of Schiller once on a Sunday afternoon, a translation;

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

I don't know a word of German. I read a page, and felt I was in a fog. I turned back and read it over again; this time I was sure I wasn't right. I tried it a third time, and then I went for *A Woman in White*. I am never going to read dry books for the sake of saying I have read them. I am not clever or learned, and don't want to be. You have so much more fun in life if you are not expected to be clever.

To fill up the blank spaces in my bookcase I have placed Tupper's *Proverbial Philosophy*, Locke *On the Understanding*, and Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. I found them in the cellar. Tupper has a nice back—blue with little gold stars. Then I have several poets. I am going to whisper something now—I am not devoted to Shakespeare. Was there ever a braver or more truthful girl? I like Tennyson and Shelley and Byron a thousand times better. Maud, with her head running over with curls, and the poor man lying on that Breton shore talking to little shells after he had killed her brother; oh, how dreadful it was! Great tears come into my eyes. If I had been Maud I should have rushed after him and married him as fast as I could. Women are so superior and uppish in poetry.

Two poets I have stuck together at the back of the shelf in a dark corner—Chaucer and Burns. Men should not be allowed to write in Early English and Scotch, I would sooner read Latin.

* * * * *

MR. INDERWICK CALLS.

Why don't I flourish like a green bay tree? On two occasions within the last fortnight I have been desperately deceitful—the store-cupboard key and my sore throat! And I haven't and don't flourish. Judgment descends upon and crushes me as remorselessly as a veritable Juggernaut. According to the promise set forth in the Bible, I should at the moment be having a real good time in the dining-room with Mr. Inderwick! for he is here, and is drinking tea with my family; instead of which I am sitting in a dull, cold, and depressing bedroom, and no more resemble a green bay tree than a shrivelled, brown nettle does an arum lily.

It is too exasperating. What Mr. Inderwick can be thinking of to go paying calls in first-class typhoons beats my feeble comprehension. He may enjoy slates and chimney-pots whizzing through the air, but it seems a dangerous amusement. And he still limps. When the front gate banged, and I saw a man being blown up the walk, I thought, at first, it was Sammy. It was getting dark, and I watched him idly from the window. As he approached the house, however, and the rugged figure and big shoulders loomed more clearly out of the gloom there was no mistaking it, it was Mr. Inderwick, with his hat jammed firmly on to his head, and his body enveloped in a huge, rough overcoat. He did not see me, and in a trice I had kicked off my slippers, tiptoed down the passage, and, craning my neck over the banisters, was just in time to hear him

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

inquire if Mrs. Wycherley were at home, see him shake himself like a Newfoundland dog, and follow Rose into the dining-room. And of course that pert Rose looked up and caught me peeping—her eyes are all over the place—and when she brought up my tea a few minutes ago she observed cheerfully it was a pity I was so poorly, as Mr. Inderwick had just asked for me. I told her to shut the door and bring me up some more coal.

Rose is somewhat familiar at times ; she is the late Crabby's cowman's daughter, and appears to think it her duty to discuss old Crabby's nephew, and I don't.

It was quite unnecessary, too, for Angela to send me up another box of jujubes and more currant vinegar. Her attentions are oppressive, especially as I told her I was much better.

Oh, dear, what a wretched girl I am ! Such an extraordinarily unattractive day for a man to select to pay calls, and dangerous. A flying chimney-pot might have struck him on the head, or a tree snapped and knocked him down.

I wonder if Angela's eyes would fall out of her head if I donned Aunt Menelophe's tea-gown, floated into the dining-room with a Society woman's languid, graceful movements, and, dropping on to a couch, motioned Mr. Inderwick to my side. Would she ever survive it ? I wish I had the courage to do it. A brave girl would ; a courageous girl wouldn't think twice about it ; a girl with plenty of backbone would

MR. INDERWICK CALLS.

be there by now. It would be a natural and every-day occurrence for her to be robed in an elegant tea-gown at five o'clock in the afternoon, and to descend from her rose-tinted boudoir to take tea with her family. *I will be a girl with a backbone, I will do it!*

I have flung Jeremy Taylor into a corner—he has been sort of winking at me all the afternoon—and the jujubes after him, nasty, sticky abominations!

CHAPTER XVII.

I UNFORTUNATELY KNOCK OFF A PIECE OF
ANGELA'S HAIR, AND SHE IS EXTREMELY ANNOYED.

THAT was yesterday. It was yesterday I descended from my rose-tinted boudoir and in trailing, silken garments floated into the dining-room as bright and radiant as a green bay tree, which was my due; and to-day I am pickling onions, and feel like a blighted weeping willow. To say that I gave them a shock would be using the mildest and most restrained of language. Even Dibbs sat up on his hind legs and wailed, in the same way that emotional people weep when they see a beautiful picture or hear divine music. Dibbs is peculiarly sensitive. Angela almost sat up on *her* hind legs, only Mr. Inderwick's presence restrained her. I never realised before that one's eyes could be so prominent unless suffering from heart disease. Mother put two shrimps into her second cup of tea and several lumps of sugar on to her plate. Mr. Inderwick was the only controlled member of the party. He drew up an armchair to the fire for me, and, thanking him gracefully, I leant back against the one hard

ANGELA IS EXTREMELY ANNOYED.

cushion and green wool antimacassar, and gave a little sigh.

I did not give them time to speak, it would have been fatal. My backbone was of steel, but it was vulnerable; they mustn't get one home. I told mother I would have *one* cup of tea, as she was so pressing. I thanked Angela for the jujubes, which had relieved me considerably. I inquired sympathetically after Mr. Inderwick's ankle, and I gathered Dibbs, who was dirty, on to my knee, with a fine disregard for the delicate and priceless—to me—texture of my gown. I was accustomed to tea-gowns billowing round me like lemon sponge. It was annoying that Dibbs should sniff at the lemon sponge as though he had not met it before, obliging me to restrain him with gentle though forceful hand, but perhaps it was not observed.

It was a strain, too, to one's mental faculties keeping an eye upon Angela. She was gathering together her resources; three times she drew breath, and three times, with unerring skill, I parried that breath. I took the sentences out of her mouth, leaving her gaping. I chattered, I talked, I laughed, I scintillated; my conversation would have rivalled Horace Walpole's. Mr. Inderwick, without an invitation, drew his chair nearer to mine, and his staring was more protracted than usual. Mother, after ringing the bell for Rose to remove the tea things, took up her knitting, as is her customary habit, but did not knit. The four needles lay inert

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

on her lap ; her lips were parted, and her eyes rested upon my face as though it were strange to her. Only Angela remained at the table, fixed, immovable, awaiting her opportunity. I did not see her with my eyes—I was talking to Mr. Inderwick—but her presence filled the entire room—that waiting, ominous, silent figure. It oppressed me, but I rattled on. It seemed to suffocate me, and my voice faltered ; but still I struggled gamely, and then Mr. Inderwick rose to go. I was saved. My gratitude to him was unbounded. I smiled up at him, and insisted upon going to the door. A breath of fresh air would do me good, I said, and swept out into the hall before him. He closed the dining-room door behind him, probably fearing the draughts for mother, and was a long time in putting on his coat. I felt that Rose was peeping again, and began to feel nervous.

“ Is your ankle quite well ? ” I asked jerkily, forgetting that I had already put this question to him twice.

His answer was quite beside the mark—

“ When will you come for another drive ? ”

“ Never,” I replied quickly, beginning to open the hall door.

He closed it again quietly.

“ I am not going yet, I have lost my gloves. Why won’t you come ? ”

“ I can’t.”

“ Were they angry with you ? I wanted to come

ANGELA IS EXTREMELY ANNOYED.

the following day, but the doctor wouldn't allow it."

"You are not looking for your gloves," I observed.

"Never mind them." He spoke impatiently.
"Were they angry with you?"

"A little."

"I am sorry," he said, and his face went quite gentle and soft.

"Oh, I didn't mind," I remarked hurriedly. I was convinced Rose was peeping, and he was looking at me in a way that made me wish he wouldn't.

"What were your gloves like, and where did you put them?" I inquired brilliantly, again opening the door.

This time he closed it without speaking, and stood as though lost in thought. I was sure the dining-room door opened an inch, and I felt desperate.

"Mr. Inderwick, are you going to take up your abode at Shady Oak? It is a little cold here, and my gown is thin."

"I wish I could."

I was unprepared for such an answer, and he spoke with such earnestness that my cheeks went hot and my heart jumped. Supposing they *had* heard him. I made another hurried movement towards the door, but he forestalled me.

"I never saw anyone so anxious to get rid of a guest. Are you usually as rude to your friends?"

"I have a cold," I replied lamely.

"Is that why you wear a thin silk gown?"

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

“It is lined and quite warm.”

“It is very pretty.”

“Aunt Menelophe gave it to me.”

“She’s first-class taste. You look splendid in it.”

I sat down limply. I had distinctly heard a suppressed sound from the neighbourhood of the kitchen.

“Mr. Inderwick, I don’t wish to appear impolite, but if you *are* staying will you return with me to the dining-room? It really is cold out here.”

He smiled and shook hands.

“Your hand is very warm,” he said calmly. “I don’t think you are cold really, but I am going.”

“Have you found your gloves?”

“I didn’t bring any now I come to think of it. Shall you be at church on Christmas morning?”

“I thought you were going away?”

“No, I have changed my mind; there are difficulties in the way—the farm——”

“I see.”

“Besides, I would like to help you with the church decorations if I may?”

“Help me with the decorations?” This man would never cease to astonish me.

“Yes, Mrs. Oates told me you had undertaken the font.”

“It is very kind of Mrs. Oates, but she is not very exact. I merely said when she called to solicit our annual contribution of holly and evergreens that I might possibly go one day.”

ANGELA IS EXTREMELY ANNOYED.

“Which day do you think it will be?” he asked imperturbably.

“It depends on the mince-pies.”

“I don’t wish to appear curious, but I should be glad if you will explain the connection?”

He put his foot inside the door to prevent my closing it.

“Are you under the impression that I am a prisoner at the bar and you the counsel for cross-examination, Mr. Inderwick? If so, I will fetch a shawl.” I spoke with some asperity, and pushed the door against his boot.

“One moment, please, Miss Hazel, then I will go. About the mince-pies. Won’t you explain? Do you take them to the church to refresh you?”

I laughed in spite of myself. His persistence made me feel weak.

“I don’t know why I gratify your curiosity, but Christmas week is a busy time with us. One day we make scores of mince-pies. Angela makes the pastry, and I butter the tins and fill, and put on the lids and cross them with a skewer——”

“Cross them with a skewer?”

“Don’t interrupt,” I said. “The following day we distribute these mince-pies among the undeserving villagers. It takes us hours—Heatherland straggles, and we walk for miles.”

“I could help you with that.”

I disregarded the interruption.

“Another day we decorate the church, that also

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

takes us hours ; there are the wreaths and texts, and gossip and tea in the vestry. Christmas Day falls on a Thursday this year——”

“ So that probably will mean mince-pies Monday, distribution to undeserving villagers Tuesday, church decorations Wednesday. I will be there on Wednesday, December 24th, and will cut you all your holly ready for the wreaths, if you will allow me ? ”

“ It is prickly work. Good-night, Mr. Inderwick,” I said.

“ Good-night ; it could not be more prickly than a young lady I know. Don’t forget Wednesday,” said he, as he went away into the darkness.

I smiled to myself, and, much refreshed and stimulated, returned to the den of lions. At any rate, I had one nice friend in the world.

“ She shan’t snub me, she shan’t dictate to me, she shan’t sit upon me,” I said to myself as I opened the door.

Angela was hemming a table-cloth and mother knitting. Jauntily I walked down the room—my train gave me courage—and seated myself on the arm of mother’s chair. She did not look up. I spoke caressingly to Dibbs, and he merely replied with a snore. I glanced at Angela, and debated as to whether she were human or a stone image. I attempted to whistle cheerfully, and my whistle gave out. I swung my foot backward and forward, and mother requested me to be still. At the end of five minutes I rose.

ANGELA IS EXTREMELY ANNOYED.

"I think I will return to my room," I observed carelessly.

"Your fire has been extinguished and the windows thrown open for ventilation; the night air might be injurious to your health."

The sound came from the neighbourhood of Angela's larynx, but it was unlike a voice. It was unlike anything I had ever heard.

I sat down again and watched her hem. I felt unable to do anything, that voice had bereft me of speech. The needle clicking against her silver thimble so evenly and smoothly held me fascinated. Her cotton never knotted as does mine; she never missed a stitch. Rapidly her white fingers worked their way along the linen with such regularity, such monotony, that I felt I should shriek. If only she would prick one of them, or break her needle! If only she would speak, say something, lecture me, scold me—anything but that silent and remorseless hemming! She neared the end, the last stitch was taken, the thread was broken off. Deliberately she folded her work, deliberately she raised her eyes slowly and deliberately she allowed those cold blue orbs to rest upon me. My time was come.

"I have something to say to you, Hazel."

"Well?"

"Were you really poorly this morning?"

"No."

"No sore throat?"

"No."

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

“Anything the matter with you?”

“No.”

“Your illness was an entire fabrication?”

“Yes.”

“Do you hear that, mother?” Mother shuffled.

“Do you hear, mother?”

“Yes.”

Dear mother sounded unhappy.

Angela took out another piece of work from her basket and resumed her sewing. I noticed it was a baby's pink head-flannel, and it seemed an anachronism.

“Is that all?” I asked breathlessly.

“That is all. It may appear strange to you, but I have no further desire to converse with a liar—a deceitful liar—with one who decks herself out after the manner of strange women, and who with men is bold and forward.”

Was it a kindly, sympathetic Providence who steadied my arm and enabled me to aim that hard cushion unerringly at the head of my sister and—dislodge a piece of her dead hair?

In the first flush of victory a rare, strange feeling of satisfaction and elation crept through my veins. I felt as a sportsman must feel. I was the sportsman, Angela a partridge; and I had hit her, and for the moment I loved her as a victor can afford to love a vanquished foe.

But when I caught sight of the hair lying like a pale, dead snake upon the carpet my teeth chattered

ANGELA IS EXTREMELY ANNOYED.

and the strength went out of my body. I had unwittingly laid bare my sister's one little feminine weakness, her one little vanity, her one weak human spot. For long I had guessed that all those neat, shining coils upon her head were not grown there. I had observed that those coils when down and being dried in front of the dining-room fire were thinner and rattier and skimpier than when up ; but I had never been able to investigate this delicate matter closely. Angela's door is securely fastened at night.

My knees turned in from weakness as I crept across the carpet and, picking up the shiny snake, offered it to her with humility. But she took no notice of it or me ; we might have been beggar-women who could have found charring. Gently I dropped it on to the table in front of her, and was preparing to creep away when a stifled sound from mother caused me to pause. I turned, and found her making violent pantomimic gestures. They fascinated me for an instant, the contortions of her face were so truly remarkable.

“What is it? What do you want me to do?” I grimaced back at her.

Quickly she pointed a finger at Angela, whose wounded back was turned to us. Then it became clear to me—I was to apologise, I was to say I was sorry. I wondered I had not grasped it sooner.

“Never!” I shouted. Mother's lip gave an ominous tremble. “Never!” I reiterated fiercely,

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

steeling myself against the tremble. "Never! It was her own fault."

"Do, Hazel. Angela will never forgive you," she whispered.

"I don't care; I don't want her forgiveness. She called me a liar and shameless." I was lashing up my anger. The bare patches on Angela's head had at first awed me, but now I was becoming accustomed to the sight my courage was returning. "She must apologise to me *this* time, and I—may forgive her," I added with magnanimity. I spoke loudly, and drew up the easy-chair to the fire, turning up my silk gown to prevent singeing. Mother looked positively aghast. "I am not a little girl," I continued. "For the sake of peace and quietness I have always given in to Angela. I have submitted to being ordered about, dictated to, bossed, and I will stand it no longer. From this moment there will be a change, a big change." My voice rang out defiantly. "When I choose to stay in my bedroom and have a fire I shall consult *you* alone. I shan't be driven to have a sore throat: Angela forced me to have a sore throat, Ang——"

I stopped dead, for Angela had slowly turned her head and was fixing me with an eye. It is difficult to explain, it is impossible, it is beyond the descriptive powers of an ordinary human being to describe that eye of Angela's. It was her right eye; her head was only partly turned, and the left eye was not visible. Perhaps one eye is more awful than

ANGELA IS EXTREMELY ANNOYED.

two; I cannot say; I only know that my courage went. It did not ooze after the ordinary habits of courage about to depart, it just went like a rocket. One moment I sat with folded arms, Napoleon-like in my attitude, defying the world; the next I was standing behind my sister's chair, saying, "I am sorry, Angela, sorry for knocking off your hair, and I will never do it again."

And that is why to-day I feel like a blighted weeping willow, and stand in my old brown stuff frock pickling onions. I am a craven, a coward; I am pulpy and characterless. I am perfectly aware that Elizabeth should pickle onions, and not I; her eyes should be watering, and not mine; her hands should be tying the bladders on the top of the jars, and not mine; but Angela willed it so. Angela decreed that I should pickle onions as a penance. She did not say so, but I know it. Yesterday I knocked off her dead hair, to-day I pickle onions: the connection is obvious.

I am a woman, I am twenty-one; I am tall and strong in body, with a fine digestion and abundance of courage towards the world generally—towards everything and everybody—till Angela comes along, then I shrink into an infant of six months. Why should this be? Am I really weak, really cowardly? or is Angela something not human? She may be one of a stone species. There was a Stone Age, why not a stone species? And yet that false hair! People of stone wouldn't mind thin places and bald

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

patches, they wouldn't consider their appearance. Yes, Angela is human; it is *I* who am at fault. I have allowed her to rule me since the day I was born, and now when the yoke has become intolerable I am too weak and cowardly to throw it off. But I have put four times too many peppercorns into the pickle and two ounces of cayenne, and Angela doesn't like hot things.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MR. INDERWICK ASKS ME TO BE HIS WIFE, AND I SAY "NO."

WHEN I looked out of my bedroom window this morning my sleepy eyes rested upon a soft tumble of swansdown and velvety blue sky and white trees heavily laden. There had been a fall of snow in the night—the elements had planned for once to be seasonable—and the whole world—my world, the Welsh hills, and fields and garden and oak trees were of a dazzling whiteness, all save the big, solemn trunks which showed up green, and the holes which Sammy's and Dibbs's feet had made in trampling across the lawn.

"How wonderfully beautiful!" I murmured. "How good to be alive in spite of—Angela and things like pickled onions," and yet a few hours later I was almost wishing that Hazel Wycherley were snuffed out. For I have dealt a man—one of the nicest of men—a nasty knock, and I would have given much to have been able to stay my hand, but I couldn't.

Robert Inderwick asked me this afternoon to be his wife, and I have said "No." I pause now

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

and wonder what made me, for the moment he had gone a feeling of desolation fell upon me ; I felt all queer and empty inside, but perhaps that was because we had been such good friends, had seen so much of each other lately. I naturally missed him, as I should miss any friend. I wonder.

When I think of his face as I said "Good-bye" I could sob, and it seems so strange to think that I have been able to call up such a look on any man's face. It almost makes me feel frightened, frightened and yet curiously happy. Whatever else in life lies before me—whatever sorrow, loneliness, misery—I shall always have that to look back upon, that once Robert Inderwick loved me greatly and wished me to be his wife ; he did me that honour. So few people have loved me—only father and—Aunt Menelophe—I think *she* cares for me a little, and mother might if Angela would allow her.

If only I could have said "Yes" instead of "No." But I could not go to him empty-handed, give nothing. He said that he had enough love for both of us, and that he would teach me to care for him after we were married. But I don't want to be taught ; I want to love him spontaneously. I want to love as well as be loved. If I don't love him now, I am sure I shouldn't afterwards—I could never be taught. And I don't feel I *could* settle in Heatherland for the rest of my days. And I am sure his untidy clothes would worry me. To-day, for instance, there was a bit of white woolly stuff poking out of his tie where the

MR. INDERWICK ASKS ME TO BE HIS WIFE.

silk was all worn—he has worn the same tie for three months, and it is so ugly; and his boot-laces were knotted in three places. Now I could not marry a man who wore ties with protruding insides. So that clearly proves I don't love him. Such trifles wouldn't affect me in the least if I loved him tremendously.

He says I expect too much of love, that most women do. That they go analysing and probing into their feelings and wondering "Do I love him sufficiently? Is this love, or am I only pleased and flattered?" That they keep pulling up this poor love by the roots like a radish to see how it is growing, till they have killed it.

But I am not like that, for I have kept putting the whole thing from me. I think for the last few weeks I have been realising vaguely that Robert Inderwick was beginning to like me a little, but I wouldn't allow myself to believe it or think about it. I knew if it were so, that all our fun and pleasant friendship must cease; that I must no longer meet him for walks or have good times with him; all would be ended, and my life duller than ever. No, I have not allowed myself to think, and we might have gone on in the same jolly, friendly way for months if only I had not made an idiot of myself, and cried. That weeping precipitated matters; I might have known he would just be the sort of man to go and get upset by a girl's silly tears, and yet I could not help it. If a Spanish Inquisition man had come

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

along and said, "Now, if you shed one tear I shall pop you on the rack," I should still have cried. There are moments when you can no more prevent yourself from doing a thing than you can stop yourself breathing for any length of time.

And the cause of my distress was nothing very serious, nothing more than usual—it was only Angela. Angela had tried me sorely, it is true, but then she always tries me sorely. She had given me Fox's *Book of Martyrs* for a Christmas present at breakfast, and she knew how much I wanted a lace collar. Then at dinner she gave me a lecture; I preferred the martyrs. She said it had been hinted to her by Mrs. Oates—old cat!—that all Heatherland was gossiping about the outrageous way I had flirted with Mr. Inderwick when we were decorating the font; that he, poor man, had made several efforts to remind me that I was in a place of worship, but I would not be snubbed. I fairly sat and gasped with rage, but mother's imploring eye and the white cotton-wool text over the sideboard, "Peace on earth, goodwill towards men," helped me to confine my anger to long gasps. In addition she observed that the mince-pies were as heavy as lead—I made the pastry this week—and that I looked sallow—just as though everybody didn't look sallow in the snow—and was I bilious.

As she swallowed her last fragment of walnut I bolted from the room, seized my hat and jacket, and dashed out of the house. I felt I must have air,

MR. INDERWICK ASKS ME TO BE HIS WIFE.

space, to be alone; above all, to be alone in the beautiful still whiteness, quite alone. And then—if Mr. Inderwick didn't appear, just as I was turning on to Oldfield Common, and join me on my walk, in the way he always does appear to join people on their walks, for all the world like a collie dog.

“What is the matter?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” I inquired coldly.

“What made you dash out of the house and tear along as though you intended getting to Bagdad and back before nightfall?”

“How did you know?”

“I was standing at the window.”

“You must have good eyesight,” I observed.

“Not particularly. I had a field-glass.”

I stopped short in the road.

“Is it your custom to spy upon your friends?”

He looked a little guilty.

“Sometimes, not often,” he replied.

“It is very pleasing for us I am sure. I was under the impression an Englishman's home was his castle, free from the curious gaze of the stranger, the vulgar stare of the outsider. Perhaps you will turn a search-light on to us next.”

“Don't be disagreeable,” he said; “this is Christmas Day, and you should be at peace with all your fellow-men. Why did you rush out like that? Tell me. Was there anything wrong?”

“I was sick of Angela and the house.”

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

The words slipped out unwittingly, and I made no attempt to recall them.

"Poor child," said he gently.

The sympathy in his voice fell as balm on my weary spirit, and—suddenly two big tears welled up into my eyes. He looked away from me at once.

"You know Angela is a little trying at times," I went on. "I don't think she means to be, but I—I—" my voice quavered, then broke, and I was fairly crying like a baby. Vainly I struggled to check the tears which were racing down my cheeks and splashing on to my muff, but they would not be checked. His "poor child" had opened the flood gates, and the tears chased each other as though they never meant to stop.

"What must you think of me?" I asked at length with a big gulp. "I never cry—at least not often. I can't think what is the matter with me. You shouldn't have sympathised with me, sympathy is a fatal thing. I must go home. I can't be seen like this."

"You're all right," he said, still without looking at me. "Come down this quiet lane, it leads to the shore, doesn't it? We shan't meet a soul for at least a couple of miles, and then you will be feeling better."

I followed him unresistingly. I was very tired, and he seemed so big and strong, the very size of his presence soothed me. We walked along for some time in silence through the soft snow, his head

MR. INDERWICK ASKS ME TO BE HIS WIFE.

always turned Deeward and mine Heatherland way. Gradually the tears dried up, and I began to feel better. My eyes smarted woefully, and my nose felt as though it ought to belong to Joey Tomlinson, but my heart seemed five or six pounds lighter.

"I am better now," I said, "and I want you to talk; but don't look at me for quite half an hour, please, not till the wind has had a chance."

"All right," he replied, "but couldn't you make it a quarter of an hour? Thirty minutes is a long time."

"No," I said firmly, "you would have a dreadful shock."

"I like shocks."

"Not this kind. I know I resemble a spotted red cabbage."

"I never saw one. May I look?"

"Certainly not, you promised. Now will you talk."

"What am I to talk about? I am out of practice."

"Of anything, of anybody, so long as it makes me forget myself. You don't know how ashamed I feel. And I had really nothing to cry about, nothing of any importance—no death, or disgrace, or ruin staring us in the face, just a few small worries, chiefly of my own manufacture. You must think me an awful baby."

"No, I don't," he answered, and I wondered how he managed to get his gruff voice so soft and gentle. "I think you are jolly plucky. If your sister were mine I should bash her head in."

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"Mr. Inderwick," I cried, "I would like to shake hands with you. I have no right to allow you to say such a thing. It is wrong of me, wicked, unsisterly, unfeeling, unnatural. I ought to be horrified, but I think it's the grandest thing I ever heard in my life. It's what I have been wanting someone to say for over fifteen years; it's what I have been wanting someone to do. Probably I should stop you bashing in her head if you attempted it, my feelings as a sister might become too strong for me, but I should know you had the desire to do so. Someone besides myself had wanted to bash in Angela's head. Thank you for saying those words. Shake hands, I shall deem it an honour."

I stopped and held out my hand. He took it gravely into his big, woolly one, and then appeared to forget to let go.

"May I look now? It is nearly half an hour."

"No," I said quickly, and he straightway looked, and what I saw in his face caused me to wrest away my hand and start off at a brisk pace down the road.

He strode after me. "Wait a minute," he called imperatively, "it's got to be said."

"Not to-day," I cried, my heart beating violently. (There was no use pretending I did not know his meaning, it was too obvious.) "Not to-day. I'm not—ready—and we are having such a jolly time."

"Are we? And not five minutes since you were crying enough to break your heart. And I had to

MR. INDERWICK ASKS ME TO BE HIS WIFE.

stand there like a stuck pig, and could do nothing to help you, absolutely nothing, and—I could hardly keep my hands off you. God, I would have given everything I possess to have been able to comfort you, to help you, and——” then his voice broke suddenly. “Hazel, little Hazel, won’t you let me take care of you? I would take such good care of you. You want looking after, you are such an excitable, feverish—child I was going to say; you are a child one moment and a woman the next, the one woman in the world to me. And I’m getting an old fellow, according to you, though I’m young as men go, and I’m gruff, but——”

“Don’t, Mr. Inderwick,” I interrupted, “don’t say any more.” I was walking for my life and becoming breathless. “I can’t listen to you.”

“But you shall,” he cried, getting in front of me. “You’ve got to listen, it’s only fair. You’ve got to sit down on this stile here and listen, and when I have said my say you shall go.”

Meekly I sat down. His hands had hurt, and there was a sternness in his face which was not to be trifled with. He stood beside me, partly leaning against the stile, his face turned towards the hills across the water.

“Well?” I said at length a little nervously.

Then the muscles of his face relaxed, and he turned to me with one of his rare, whimsical sort of smiles.

“Is it well?” he asked. “Say it is well, Hazel.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

I do so love you. It is impossible to make you understand how I love you. Will you be my wife? Don't answer in a hurry, give me a chance. I never meant to speak for weeks. I thought somehow you were not ready. I hoped you might be ready if I gave you more time; but your crying—God, every tear hurt like hell!" He came closer and laid his hand on mine. "Won't you look up, Hazel, and say that one day you will marry me? I don't ask you to marry me to-morrow—I must give you time to get used to the idea—say not for six months; that's a deuce of a time, but I would wait. I would wait even longer than that if only you will say you love me the least little bit, and will one day come and live with me at the Old Hall Farm."

"I can't, Mr. Inderwick," I said. "I can't. I'm awfully sorry, but it's impossible."

"Why can't you?" he asked sharply.

"I don't—love you."

"Not the least little bit?"

"Not the least little bit," and I wondered was this the truth.

He turned away and was silent for some minutes.

"Then you have only felt like a friend all these weeks?"

"Yes," I whispered. "Haven't you?"

"No, I haven't. I believe I have loved you since the day I saw you in church, certainly since the moment when you smiled at me. I thought that smile was the most delightful of any that had ever

MR. INDERWICK ASKS ME TO BE HIS WIFE.

fallen my way, and they had not been many since—since my mother died. I thought——”

“ You knew me, then ? ” I broke in.

“ Yes, I knew you.”

“ And you didn’t smile back,” I said with some heat ; “ you deliberately snubbed me and put me to shame in the presence of the whole congregation.”

“ Snub you ! ” he ejaculated. “ Why my breath was taken away. I had been staring at you ever since you had entered the church, wondering who you were—I did not recognise you till afterwards—thinking that as you stood there in that frilly white thing you wore and the yellow roses, that—that—well, that you were the prettiest girl my eyes had rested on for many a long year. I was wishing I could see your full face, when suddenly round you turned and flashed that smile upon me, fairly dazzling me, knocking me all of a heap, and by the time my feeble intelligence had grasped that it was really intended for me, you had turned away in a horrid temper—a most unchristian temper.”

“ I admit I was cross,” I said, laughing.

“ Yes, and you were not only cross when you sat on the gate that afternoon, but abominably rude and unkind. I think I was very patient and forgiving ever to speak to you again after the disagreeable speeches you flung at me ; but I couldn’t help it, for the next time I saw you you were ducking for apples in a tub. I wonder if you knew how you looked as you emerged from its depths with your eyes shining and the little

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

drops of water sparkling on your dark, fluffy hair. And later on you were seedy and faint. Do you remember? You were quite nice and gentle, and not independent and prickly as a thorn-bush, and you leant on me and let me take care of you. I knew then I was beginning to love you. A something came over me as you groped your way through the hall—at each step leaning more heavily upon me—a longing always to take care of you. Hazel”—he came closer to me but did not touch me—“Hazel, won’t you give me the right to look after you again—now and always? I would take such good care of you, I would be so gentle; you think me rough, I know, but I *could* be gentle. Are you quite sure you don’t love me a little, just a trifling bit? You don’t seem to dislike being with me. We were friends in the old days, and these last few months we have not had bad times together, have we?”

He looked long and searchingly into my face, and oh, how I wished he wouldn’t! When he talked so I felt I must say “Yes,” and yet did I love him? It is so difficult, so dreadfully difficult for a woman to know. So difficult to distinguish between interest, good comradeship, a desire to be liked and admired by a man, a desire to be in the society of a man—and love.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I whispered, when I could bear his scrutiny no longer. “I can’t talk to you if you do, and I want to—to thrash things out, to explain. I don’t want to appear to have been

MR. INDERWICK ASKS ME TO BE HIS WIFE.

unfair. It is quite true, I *do* like being with you tremendously. No one knows how much I have enjoyed our walks and talks. You are so unexpected and—and rude, so different to Frederick Moss and the few other men I have known. I was so delighted when I heard you had come to the Old Hall Farm. When I went for walks I hoped always that I should meet you. I looked for your coming, I was low at the thought of your being away at Christmas. You see how honest I am, but—that does not follow I love you or want to be with you always, does it? Have you ever thought, Mr. Inderwick, what it must be *always* to live with a person?"

"Often," he replied vehemently, "I have thought of little else for the last four months. It has been with me sleeping and waking. I have seen you curled up in the big armchair in my den on the opposite side of the hearth to me—you with your book, I with mine. I have imagined that something amused you, took your fancy, and you wanted to read it to me; and that, for my better hearing, as I am getting "so old," I have made you cross the hearth and come closer to me, very close, and we have read and laughed over the passage together. I have pictured you in the high-backed oak chair at the other end of the table at breakfast, throwing impertinent speeches at me from behind the coffee-pot, discussing the affairs of the nation in your customary illogical way. I've heard your high-heeled slippers tap, tapping across the stone hall, and your skirts

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

swishing up and down the staircase as you busied yourself about your household affairs—Parian jugs and bronze horses, for instance!"

He paused and smiled banteringly at me.

"Go on," I commanded.

"I've seen you lazing in the orchard on summer afternoons in that pretty white frock of yours——"

"It would be worn out," I interrupted.

"I should instantly get you another," he made answer. "We would go together to Liverpool to buy it and a big shady sun hat. I picture you more than any other way in that sun hat. We are on the shore together poking about for eels as we did years ago; we are in hayfields; we are having tea in the garden; we are strolling through the lanes on summer nights, but you are always in that hat."

"It would get very shabby," I suggested.

He did not answer, he did not appear to hear me; his eyes were on the hills.

"Yes, you are always with me in thought," he continued. "Where you are and what you are doing I am and I am doing; and now——"

He ceased abruptly.

"You are imaginative and romantic," I remarked flippantly. I did not feel flippant; I felt if he said another word I should again burst into tears.

"No," (his voice was very quiet) "I don't think so. I am not young enough to be romantic. It is all quite natural. When you love a person deeply

MR. INDERWICK ASKS ME TO BE HIS WIFE.

you want to have that person with you, that is all. It is not romance, it is common sense. I care for you more than I thought it was possible to care for anyone. Six months ago I should have said it was quite impossible. I have never been a lover of mankind generally. I am not gregarious; I have lived much alone, and never seemed to feel my loneliness till lately. Now I am very lonely."

"So you want me because you are dull?"

"No, I am only dull because I want you."

We sat in silence for some time. A peewit hovered and circled and cried mournfully above the snowy fields; the afternoon was waning, and I shivered. He noticed it, and laid his big gloved hand very gently on mine.

"Well, little Hazel, have you nothing to say?"

I shook my head.

"Not one kind word? You can't find one small corner in your heart for me?"

"You would want a very large one, I think," I answered tremulously.

"No, I would be content with quite a minute place at first. I'm not greedy; at least, not very. Do you mind answering me a question—truthfully—then you shall go?"

"I'll try, but don't make it very difficult?"

"Why don't you love me, or why do you think you don't love me? That is not very difficult, is it? I quite realise I am not attractive, and that there is no special reason why a girl *should* fancy me; but I

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

would like to know why you in particular don't care about me."

He looked at me gravely.

"That is an exceedingly difficult question," I said.
"I don't think I can answer it."

"A case of Dr. Fell?" he asked.

"No; for I *do* like you very very much, as I said before."

"Well, try and think of anything you may have against me. Imagine that I am not asking you to marry me; look upon me as your brother."

"That would be delightful," I said, smiling. "If you were my brother I should have heaps of fault to find with you."

"Out with them, I'm all attention."

"Well, firstly, you are so untidy and careless about your appearance. It is shocking. Your tie, now, for instance."

"What's the matter with it?" he inquired wonderingly, putting his hand to his neck.

"All its woollen inside is coming out. You have worn it for three months on end, and it's very ugly. Blue doesn't suit you; you should wear green."

"Should I? Well, that's quite easy. I will order a dozen green ties to-morrow. Why didn't you say so before?"

"It had nothing to do with me," I said distantly.

"Perhaps not, but it would have been kind of you. Anything else?"

"Your boots——"

MR. INDERWICK ASKS ME TO BE HIS WIFE.

“What’s wrong with them? They are a splendid pair,” he said, glancing down.

“Look at the laces,” I commanded.

He looked, and became thoughtful.

“But you don’t mean to say a girl would refuse a man because of his boot-laces?” he asked indignantly.

“Some girls might. Women are very easily affected by small external matters,” I said lightly.

“They are not worth having, then; men are better without them.”

His voice was hard, and I suddenly felt very small.

“Of course I was joking,” I murmured.

“I don’t think you were altogether. But you are quite right; I believe a very small thing would turn the scale of a woman’s love if—she were in doubt. You don’t love me, that is evident. I don’t reproach you. I only wish you could. I am sorry. I shall probably go on caring about you always; that is the trouble with a man when he begins to care after thirty, but it can’t be helped. I shall worry through somehow.”

He rose and offered me his hand to help me down.

“You are cold,” he said more gently. “We will walk quickly.”

Not a word passed till we reached the front gate of Shady Oak.

“Good-bye,” he then said, as he held my hand for a minute. “Good-bye, little Hazel.”

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"It won't be good-bye; you mean good-night? I shall see you again?" I asked.

"No, I shan't see you again if—I can help it. I could not bear it. Good-bye."

"But why not? Couldn't we be friends?" I insisted.

"No," he answered sternly, "we couldn't. You might, but not I. That is where women are so dull of comprehension. Excuse me, I am not speaking personally, but of women as a class. They appear to think they can go to any lengths with a man who is in love with them—if they have once rejected him. They offer to be friend, sister, step-mother, grandmother, anything in fact but wife; and men are mostly fools enough to accept such offers, hoping for more to follow, but I—forgive me, Hazel, I am rough. You meant it kindly, but it's impossible. I love you too much."

Then he left me, and the world seemed suddenly cold and empty.

CHAPTER XIX.

I DESIRE TO BE A LOTUS-EATER, AND SAMMY BRINGS ME RUDELY TO EARTH.

“In the afternoon they came unto a land
In which it seemed always afternoon.”

I WANT to come to such a land. I want to be a lotus-eater. I want it to be always afternoon. A curious dulness and slackness seem to have overcome me. I feel like that toad who, after being embedded in rock for thousands of years, on being rudely ejected, simply sat down on its haunches and blinked. I want to sit down on my haunches and blink in a sunny spot under a sunny wall. I might muster up sufficient energy to fold my hands on my lap as looking more elegant, but afterwards I should want to sit absolutely still and just let the sunshine filter through my tired being.

An hour ago I expressed such a wish to mother and Angela. They were sitting turning sides of sheets to middle. I feared a desire that I should assist at this pleasant work might overcome them, and forestalled it by trying to make them understand that I felt like a thousand-year-old toad and had leanings towards being a lotus-eater.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

Angela was not sympathetic; she simply handed me a sheet and said lotus-eaters were very well in their way, but they invariably sent up the poor rates a penny in the pound. I admitted there might be some truth in her statement, but did she not think such people were rather soothing at times, rather restful to come across after the bustle of the world.

She replied they never rested her; she was only sorry for their relations, who in later years would be bound to keep them, because they—the lotus-eaters—indulged in a picturesque horror of the workhouse.

“What am I to do with the sheet?” I asked in vanquished tones, “Dusters, and bandages for Betty Totty’s bad leg, or sides to middle?”

“Sides to middle, and use fifty cotton; the last you did scrubbed,” she said with such conviction in her voice that I believed her and was glad.

I crawled under the sofa for mother’s *Church Times* footstool. On it I placed my feet to make a firm, unslopy knee for my sheet, and resignedly I started on that long seam without a turning, and tried not to think of—of—many things. I must have been sewing for ten minutes before mother discovered with horror that I was seaming with *black* cotton.

“I told you I felt like a very, very old toad,” I said.

They regarded me with widely-dilated pupils for the space of sixty seconds. appealingly I returned mother’s look. I fetched my whole soul into my

I DESIRE TO BE A LOTUS-EATER.

eyes. I tried to look as Dibbs looks when he wants a bit of meat from my plate. I wagged my tail insinuatingly, and mother relented.

"Put it away," she said gently. "You look tired. What is the matter?"

"Nothing," I quavered.

"Really?" she questioned.

"Really, motherkins," I replied untruthfully, stooping to kiss her. She held my face for a moment. I could feel the little rough, worn finger of her left hand which has sewn so much and received so many pricks in its life, and I turned and kissed it.

"There is something wrong with you, Hazel, your face is quite thin," she insisted.

"Mother, you are imaginative. I am always well," I answered, stroking the finger. "I am only lazy and—dull."

"There will be the concert at the schools next week, and two humorous recitations in addition to the tragic one Frederick Moss is giving." She spoke buoyantly, and I kissed her again.

"So there will, mother mine. It will be great fun," I replied with equal cheerfulness, and then I slipped away into the garden.

The snow had gone; the air was soft, almost balmy, and in it there was that strange, premature touch of spring which so frequently follows snow, just as though the earth had been warmed and caressed by the soft white mantle, and was stirring

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

in its sleep. As I felt its breath on my cheek my heart gave a little jumpy thrill. It always does when spring is in the air, my pulses quicken and a happiness—quite a different kind of happiness to any other—rushes through me. But this was only January 1st; it was ridiculous to think of spring. There were all the rains of fill-dyke February, and the biting winds of March to be got through first. Many weeks must pass before I could be out of doors—really out of doors. How should I get through them? Each week stretched away into another age. I saw myself an old, grey, toothless woman by the time sweet, smiling, rosy May was with us.

I sat down on the garden-roller under the privet hedge, and thought again of that land in which it seemed always afternoon.

“Here are cool mosses deep,
And thro’ the moss the ivies creep,
And in the stream the long-leaved flowers weep,
And from the craggy ledge the poppy hangs in sleep.”

“The poppy hangs in sleep!” As the lotus-eaters said, “All things have rest: why should we toil alone? We only toil, who are the first of things.” I turned and gathered a little folded privet-leaf. It had nothing to do but “grow green and broad. . . . Sun-steep’d at noon, and in the moon nightly dew-fed; and turning yellow, falls and floats adown the air.” It would never be dull or tired or depressed.

I DESIRE TO BE A LOTUS-EATER.

It lay on the palm of my hand, a little green thing fast asleep.

Sammy broke in upon my reflections.

“Would you like a russet apple, Miss Hazelt?”

I told him “No.”

“A Ribston pippin?”

“No, thank you, Sammy,” I replied.

“Aren’t you well, Miss Hazelt?”

People of a sudden seemed extraordinarily interested in the state of my health.

“Perfectly, thanks. Why?”

“Never knew you to refuse a Ribston pippin before, Miss Hazelt.”

I smiled.

“Well, I don’t mind *one*,” I said graciously as I got off the roller.

He led the way to the apple-room, and a warm fruity smell greeted us as he unlocked the door. I sat down on a wooden box and watched him as he slowly passed from one shelf to another. His movements, unhurried and deliberate, invariably remind me of a bishop in a cathedral. Were all gardeners born slow? Was Adam leisurely? Did he water the little thirsty summer flowers as though performing the sacrament of baptism—gently and deliberately, with can raised aloft—while Eve bustled round and hoed the potato-bed and brushed up the leaves? The only occasion upon which Sammy has ever been known to get up any degree of speed is when our two fowls, Bandy-legs and Yellow Tuft,

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

stray away into Sandy Lane in search of adventure ; then with hurried gait and waving arms he "shoos" them home.

As I munched my apple I reflected that he would make a good lotus-eater, and suggested how pleasant it would be to go away together to some little sun-kissed, wave-washed island in the Pacific, and do nothing till we died.

"Wouldn't you like it, Sammy—

"With half-shut eyes ever to seem
Falling asleep in a half-dream ?"

I murmured.

He sat down on the inverted box of the mowing-machine.

"I don't think I understand you rightly, Miss Hazelt."

"Well, Sammy, you eat a plant; then you just lie down in the languid, swooning air upon the yellow sand, and everything seems to go away from you, your own voice sounds far-away and thin, you feel—well, you feel as you do when you first begin to inhale gas, only much nicer; and there you lie, dozing and dreaming, and sweet music falls upon your ears—

'Music that gentlier on the spirit lies
Than tir'd eyelids upon tir'd eyes.'

And you stay on in this little island—a 'land of streams'—dozing and dreaming, dozing and dreaming till you die."

I DESIRE TO BE A LOTUS-EATER.

His answer was irrelevant, and brought me to my feet with a bound.

"I'm thinkin' you be wantin' to mate, Miss Hazelt!"

"Sammy!" I shouted.

"Yes, I do. All young things does; it's human natur'. You've all the symptims. You be lookin' pale and peaky-loike."

His voice was dogged.

"Sammy, how dare you say such things! It's untrue, you know it's untrue!"

I went closer and glowered upon him, and he backed away from me.

"Beggin' your parding, Miss Hazelt, but it's the truth as I'm a-sayin' and I'm sorry to contradict you, but the symptims—they never decaive auld Sammy. Some gets 'em one way, some another. Yours is extry bad—wantin' to take gas and sittin' about yaller sands till you dies, catchin' the rheumatics, catchin'—"

"Sammy"—I hardly recognised my own voice—"I must leave you. You completely forget yourself. I am surprised and sorry. I never thought you could have spoken so to me. Besides, I was under the impression you were truthful. I thought—"

"And it is the truth, God's gospil truth, Miss Hazelt, askin' your pardin', and real sorry I am for offendin' you, which shows it's the truth, or you wouldn't be so moidered about it. People's only moidered about things which people says about 'em

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

when they 's true. There 's summat the matter wid you, Sammy knows every look of your purty face. You 're not yourself. You never laughs now as you did. You 're dull-loike, and now you wants to go and live on an island in the Percific Ocean and listen to music, and not ten minutes since you was sittin' on the roller talking to a leaf off the privit hedge—I heard you."

I laughed, though I struggled against it, his evidence of the state of mind I was supposed to be in was so conclusive and overwhelming.

"You shouldn't have been listening. It is low down to eavesdrop; I am surprised at you. I had formed a better estimate of your character, Sammy."

"I wasn't listenin', Miss Hazelt. I just heard you."

His voice was imperturbable.

"I see, and—as we are on the subject, though you must *never* refer to it again—how long is it since you made this startling discovery about me? How long have I been wanting to—to get married?"

I endeavoured to get the entire Arctic regions into my voice and attitude, but it was thrown away upon our gardener, who settled himself in a comfortable attitude in readiness for a long and interesting conversation.

"I can't say exactly, Miss Hazelt; it 's been comin' in slowly. Some thinks since about September, and others——"

I DESIRE TO BE A LOTUS-EATER.

"Some think!" I yelled. "What *do* you mean? Do you dare to discuss me with the villagers? Do you dare——"

"Gently, gently, Miss Hazelt," Sammy broke in. "Don't fly out like that; sit yer down. Don't, now, you'll hurt yourself. Here's another Ribston, the best on the shelf. Now sit down; don't let yourself get excited. I never discusses you wid no one. It's not my place or duty——"

"Well, what do you mean? Out with it! Be quick! Who was it? Was it Miss Swiftly?" I fumed.

"Yes—p'r'aps she was one, and there was——"

"Sammy," I said, becoming suddenly calm, "I don't want to hear any more; I don't want to hear the others. Their names don't interest me. They are only common, vulgar, uneducated gossipers; such people cannot possibly interest me. You can see that, my position is so different. I am sorry I was angry. I cannot imagine how I could have been affected by what you said. It was so silly and untrue. But let me give you a word of advice—don't always say what you think, it is unwise, very unwise."

Then I stalked out of the room, and left Sammy with a hanging jaw.

When I got amongst the peaceful cabbages I offered up a little prayer of thanksgiving for having been led to refuse Mr. Inderwick's offer of marriage. The villagers should see. "Wanting to mate!" I

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

put my fingers in my ears and closed my eyes and stamped. How dare they!

* * * * *

I have written to Aunt Menelophe. She said, "If ever you are in trouble, bring it to me, and we will see what can be done with it." I am not in trouble, but I want a change; also I am anxious to give Robert Inderwick a chance of taking his walks abroad in peace. Up to the present, since—since that afternoon, each time I have met him he has bolted away in another direction, as though I were afflicted with the plague. This seems so unnecessary, and must be extremely tiresome for him. So I will go.

CHAPTER XX.

I START ON A SECOND VISIT TO AUNT MENELOPHE, AND ROBERT INDERWICK SEES ME OFF.

AUNT MENELOPHE said "Come," and I came. She wrote such a delightful letter. I did not show it to mother and Angela, there were reasons for not so doing ; Aunt Menelophe is almost painfully cute at times. But I read them selected bits.

My sister remarked that she appeared to have taken a strange and unaccountable fancy to me, and fell to musing upon it. Mother was more practical. She brought forth her account book and seven purses and boxes to see if by any manner of means she could possibly afford to spare the money for another visit.

"It is not just the railway fare," she said in depressed accents, "there are the servants to be tipped, and you will require one new dress at least."

"James shall not have a tip," I said, "I don't like him, he is familiar ; and a shilling each to the parlour and housemaids will be ample."

"No, it won't," said mother, "I should not like John Wycherley's daughter to be considered mean."

I remarked that they could not have known father,

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

as they had only been in Aunt Menelophe's service a short time ; but mother told me not to argue, as it was a bad habit.

I left home feeling dull and depressed. The morning was raw and bitter, with the wind in the east—the special brand of wind which is conducive to headache.

"We shall be dull without you ; don't be long away. I can't imagine why your Aunt Menelophe has invited you again so soon," said mother ; "it would have been much pleasanter in the summer."

I kissed her good-bye without replying, and then clambered into the 'bus.

Providence kindly and tactfully arranged that Robert Inderwick should travel that morning to Birkenhead by the same 'bus.

I distinguished his large, great-coated figure at the end of the Old Hall Road long before Jerry saw him, and my heart jumped into my mouth ; it needn't have done so, it was a wasted activity, for on recognising me as he was about to step inside the 'bus he merely bowed gravely and went outside. Now only a stupid man would do a thing like that. A woman would have more sense than to go and sit shivering in the raw air for an hour and a half on a bitter morning in January.

And yet he did not sound cold, I must confess. I could hear him chatting pleasantly with Jerry, and he was smoking, I knew, from the frequent striking of matches. Every now and again he would smooth

A SECOND VISIT TO AUNT MENEOPHE.

the bowl of his pipe with his hand, and when it was empty stroke it against his cheek. He would be admiring its colour unconsciously, and when he had finished admiring it he would smell it lovingly. I had seen him do it a dozen times or more.

I was very dull. My sole companion was Peggy Shone, who has asthma and wheezes and takes snuff, and she would keep asking me how my ma was. After assuring her for the seventh time that my parent's health was exceptionally good I turned my back on her, and huddling myself into a corner, drew up the straw round my cold legs and feet. For the hundredth time I wished devoutly that the man outside had not asked me to marry him—at present. It had spoilt everything—our fun, our walks, our talks—and left my life as dull as a graveyard. But for that proposition he would have been sitting beside me, inside the 'bus. Why could he have not withheld it—for at least another six months? Then I should have known him better, and—and would have been more than ever convinced that I had done the right thing in refusing him.

He had implied that he should be wretched, that he should never stop caring, that he *might* worry through somehow, but—and so on; and there he was talking and laughing most cheerfully with Jerry, while I sat, cold and wretched, listening to the wheezing of Peggy Shone.

I squeezed out a tear; but on reflecting that there

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

was no one there to see it I wiped it away, as it smarted in the nipping atmosphere.

On arriving at Woodside I scrambled out as quickly as my benumbed feet would admit, and ran into the station in search of an outside porter, for whom we have been searching for years without any success. Jerry had dumped my trunk down on to the pavement. It would be too cumbersome for a stray thief to pick up and bear away, but my portmanteau and hatbox would fall an easy prey, so I was obliged to lug them along with me. An evil wind waltzed up the landing-stage from the river and, turning into the station, attempted to grab my hat. I resisted. It was the pink one: I had donned it for the sole purpose of teasing Aunt Menelophe; I had sacrificed my appearance in anticipation of the real pleasure I should derive from her countenance when her eyes fell upon me. It should not be wrested from me by any wind. With two fingers of the hand which held the hatbox I managed to seize it, and promptly the string of the box snapped in twain. As it fell it was dexterously caught by a hand which unexpectedly shot out from behind me.

"You seem to be in difficulties. May I assist you?"

The offer came, in a calm, unruffled voice, from Mr. Inderwick, while the portmanteau was drawn gently but firmly out of my hand.

"No, thank you," I said. "A porter will carry them."

A SECOND VISIT TO AUNT MENELOPHE.

"He might if there were one, but he does not seem to exist; in the meantime I will, if you will permit?"

"But my trunk! It is outside."

"No, it is on its way to your train."

"To my train?" I echoed.

"Yes. The pavement of a busy thoroughfare seemed an unsuitable place for it, so I gave a poor out-of-work wretch sixpence to transfer it to the luggage-van."

I handed him the sixpence. Gravely he took it.

"How did you know where it was going?" I inquired.

"It was on the label, of course."

"Oh, of course!" I said.

"Don't you think it would be as well to tie up this box again?" he next suggested evenly. "It is difficult to carry like this."

He was hugging it under his arm.

"Give it to me," I demanded.

"No," he replied; "I don't mind carrying it. I merely suggested it would be safer with a string in case the hat should fall out."

"I haven't any string," I said feebly.

"I have. We will sit down here a moment. What time does your train go?"

"Not for half an hour."

I watched him as with deft fingers, considering the size of his hands, he made up the box.

"I think that is firm," he said at length.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"Thank you very much. Cardboard boxes are tiresome, slippery things, and don't look well."

"No," he replied, "they don't. Why don't you have a leather one with a strap?"

"Why don't I have a lot of things?" I answered him crossly.

He turned and looked at me.

"You are cold," he said. "Will you come to the refreshment-room and have some coffee? It will probably be abominable, but it may be hot."

I began to say "No, thanks," but he was leading the way and I was docilely following.

He did not speak again, and I nibbled a sponge-cake and drank my coffee in silence. Raising my eyes from a time-table I was making a pretence of studying, I surprised him in one of his long stares. He finished it to the end in no way disconcerted.

"You have not been well since—I last saw you?" he queried.

"Quite, thanks," I answered lightly.

"Really? Your looks belie you. You seem very seedy."

"I was never better," I persisted.

Again he looked at me searchingly, and to my great annoyance my own eyes dropped and I felt the colour rush into my cheeks. I defy anyone to withstand that stare of Robert Inderwick's without flinching. When I thought he really would have finished I looked up again, but he was still staring at me.

A SECOND VISIT TO AUNT MENELOPHE.

"Do you know," I said, "that is a very bad habit of yours."

"What?"

"Of staring at people. It is most embarrassing."

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I did not know I was; but I find it difficult not to look at you."

"Why?" I queried with interest.

"It is hard to say, but yours is a face at which one likes to look. It is not that it is so pretty, but it changes so rapidly; one moment it is sad—almost pathetic, and the next it is brimming over with gaiety and happiness. I wonder if—your character is the same, if your likes and dislikes change with the same lightning rapidity, because if I thought so I would—ask you a question."

"Don't," I interrupted hastily, "there is not time. I must go for my train, I shall miss it."

I rose precipitately.

"One moment, please sit down for one moment." He took my arm and pushed me back gently on to the chair. "I must speak. I may not see you again for weeks, and it will be a relief for me to know that I have left nothing unsaid."

"You have said too much" (I spoke bitterly), "that is the trouble. You have put an end to our friendship and given me nothing in return. For the last week you have avoided me as though I were possessed of a devil."

"I have offered you all I have, Hazel. It may not be very much, but there it is. The Old Hall

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

Farm may not be large or grand, but my love for you could not be measured by any ordinary standard of cubic feet or inches, it is too big, but you refuse it all."

I steeled myself against the sad ring in his voice.

"I want your friendship," I cried querulously.

"And that I cannot give, it is impossible. Anything else, but not that."

'But why?"

"Because you have made it too difficult for me. It must be all or nothing. Can't you see," he went on passionately, "that when a man loves a girl as I love you, it is morally impossible for him to be her friend." He leant across the table. "Can't you understand, or are you too dense?"

"I think I must be too dense," I said, trying to laugh; his vehemence had unnerved me. "But what was this question——? I must go."

"It was about Heatherland. It struck me after I had left you the other day that there might be other reasons for your refusing me besides the bootlaces and disreputable tie—by the way, do you see I am wearing a green one?"

"Yes, it suits you admirably; go on."

"Well, I was wondering if the idea of settling in Heatherland were distasteful to you. I know you are tired of the dullness, and I would live anywhere you liked—excepting, perhaps, Brighton," he ruminated for a moment. "No, I couldn't stick Brighton—but anywhere else, at home or abroad or

A SECOND VISIT TO AUNT MENELOPHE.

wherever you fancied. I could let the Old Hall Farm. Old Crabby has left things pretty comfortable for me; I am not rich, but I could run—say to a leather hatbox for you and lots of things."

He stopped and smiled whimsically at me.

"You are very good" (my voice *would* shake in spite of all my efforts to keep it still), "too good. But it's not Heatherland. I love the dear old village in spite of its dullness. The leather hatbox and all the other things have their attractions, but it's not that. It's—"

"What?"

His gruff voice was very gentle.

"It's the same as it was the other day. I'm—not quite sure of myself. You see, I have known so few men. How am I to know whether I love you or not till I've—"

I hesitated.

"Till you've sampled a few. Is that it?" he asked with a funny smile.

"No, it isn't," I retorted indignantly.

"What do you mean, then?"

"I—don't quite know," was my brilliant reply; "but please don't worry me any more."

Then I got up and made for the door. He picked up my belongings and followed me out.

"Why did you speak to me to-day?" I asked irritably. "You've only gone and got miserable again, and you were quite cheerful with Jerry. If only you had not helped me you would—have

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

probably forgotten all about me in a day or two."

"It is possible but not probable, and you seemed in such difficulties. I never saw anyone look so helpless."

"Oh, I should have managed," I said with dignity.

"You were not shaping well when I saw you, and your best beaver hat would have been spoilt if I had not caught that box."

"How did you know it was the beaver?"

I was beginning to feel more cheerful, he sounded more like his old self.

"I guessed; you appear only to possess two hats."

I laughed. How exactly like him was this remark.

"How long will you be away?" he asked, as he searched for a comfortable carriage for me.

"About a month. Aunt Menelophe's eldest son Wellesley, who is a journalist, and Mr. Escourt—the man at the dinner-party I told you about—are to be down there for a holiday. Wellesley has had influenza, and Aunt Menelophe wants me to help entertain them."

"Indeed," he remarked dryly. "So you will have your wish gratified and meet one or two men."

"I was unaware I had expressed such a wish. I should stick to the truth if I were you," I replied with some heat.

"Here is a carriage," he said. "Will you get in?"

A SECOND VISIT TO AUNT MENELOPHE.

He procured me a foot-warmer and some papers and magazines, and then heaved a long sigh.

"You have been working hard," I said; "I am sorry."

He smiled.

"Women *do* require a lot of things when they travel, don't they? I suppose you have your ticket?"

I looked blank, and he started off down the platform with long, swinging strides. In two minutes he was back.

"Here it is, and don't lose it; and—here are some roses" (he thrust them at me). "And I think I'll go now; I dislike waving to people in retreating trains."

I put my hand into his without speaking, and, as he walked away, the same empty sort of feeling came over me as on Christmas Day—the feeling that something valuable had gone out of my life. I shook myself vigorously.

"Hazel Wycherley, you are a fool," I said. "You refuse a man—very properly—because you are convinced you don't love him sufficiently to marry him, and then you go and want him badly."

About half-way down the platform he stopped suddenly, turned round, and walked deliberately back to the carriage.

"Have you read Browning?" he asked abruptly.

I looked at him in astonishment.

"Have you?" he repeated.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

“No.”

“Well, those two men will probably spout him to you by the yard.”

“Well?”

My surprise was increasing.

“And they’ll make you a Browningite, and you will talk about him. Do you think you are likely to talk about him?”

His voice was almost pleading.

“I don’t know. Why?”

The train began to move.

“It would be such a pity, such a thousand pities. You are not cut out for that sort of thing. Women Browningites talk such infernal rubbish. They tire one so, they——”

The rest of his sentence was drowned in the shrill whistle of the engine as we steamed out of the station. I laughed. What a strange man he was! I thought of him every minute of the way to Blongton, and the more I tried not to think of him the more I thought.

Aunt Menelophe met me. When she caught sight of me she closed her eyes, as though in pain.

“What is it, Aunt Menelophe—one of your old headaches?” I inquired sympathetically.

“That pink abomination!” she groaned. “I begged of you never to wear it again.”

“But I couldn’t travel in your beautiful beaver with all the smuts flying about,” I protested.

She cast another pained look at me, and then turned away quickly.

A SECOND VISIT TO AUNT MENELOPHE.

"We will burn it to-morrow," was all she said, but there was a note of determination in her voice.

"Now tell me what is the matter," she commanded as we drove away from the station, "and try and be truthful."

"Aunt Menelophe!"

"You may say 'Aunt Menelophe!' but girls are rarely truthful about their love affairs."

"Who said it was a love affair?" I demanded sharply.

"You didn't, but your face does. You have a very tell-tale countenance. I suppose it's that Inderwick man?"

She settled herself more comfortably.

"Why should you pitch upon him?"

She chuckled.

"Merely because your allusions to him, in your letters, have been conspicuous by their absence, and you appear to be able to write reams about every other person in Heatherland. Why have you refused him?"

"Because I don't care about him."

"That appears to be an excellent reason; but are you sure you don't?"

"Quite."

She turned, and through her lorgnon examined me carefully.

"I beg to differ from you," she said. "You have marked symptoms of caring for him very much."

"Aunt Menelophe," I began.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

“We won’t discuss it now, child. The subject will probably prove exhausting. Later—this afternoon, after I have been stimulated by tea—we shall be alone. Did you bring your tea-gown?”

“Yes.”

“Slip into it then. Tea-gowns are wonderfully soothing and helpful in the matter of love affairs. You can curl and uncurl and expand in them comfortably, as your various emotions seize and overcome you.”

“They won’t seize me,” I broke in; “I haven’t any.”

She smiled with gentle patronage.

“It is difficult to form a correct estimate of oneself. You are bubbling over with emotion. Your colour is what novelists describe as fitful; the tears are so near the surface at this moment that I doubt if you will last out till we get home.”

“Yes, I shall,” I cried fiercely, swallowing an enormous lump; “I don’t feel in the least like crying.”

“Poor little Hazel!” she said softly; then she turned and kissed me, and straightway I fell upon her neck and wept.

CHAPTER XXI.

AUNT MENELOPHE HOLDS FORTH ON THE SUBJECT OF MARRIAGE.

AUNT MENELOPHE and I have had our talk. How adorable she is! She seems to have the brain of a man and the heart of a woman and the sympathy of an angel. Just when you think she is being a little bit hard on you a beautiful, soft look steals across her face, and there creeps into her voice that note of sympathy and kindness which one imagines one can hear in the notes of birds on soft evenings in April. And she is prettier than ever. The old lace at her throat looked like a delicate cobweb mellowed in September sunlight, and her hands, as they lay folded on her grey poplin gown, reminded me of snowflakes.

It was good to be again in that soft-tinted, harmonious, beautiful room; good to feel my feet sinking into the thick carpet, and to drink China tea out of those fragile Wedgwood cups. I told her how good it was, how glad I was to be with her, how nice and soothing to feel I should see her every day for a month.

“For you *will* have me for a month, won’t you,

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

Aunt Menelophe?" I asked. "You won't tell me to leave at the end of a fortnight. I want to get braced up for — for the spring-cleaning. We are having it early this year on account of Easter."

"I thought spring-cleanings took place when fires were over," she remarked.

"We have another then. We are prodigal in the matter of cleanings; they are our one extravagance."

She sipped her tea meditatively.

"And yet you refuse to marry this man."

"I should not marry for the sake of escaping spring-cleanings," I said stiffly.

She smiled.

"Now don't get prickly; it's a bad beginning. Nobody suggested you should. I was merely reflecting that there are thousands of girls who would jump at such an offer solely to escape the disagreeables and worries of their home lives. Such marriages are rarely happy; mine wasn't. I am glad to see you have more grit in you."

"Yours?" I asked in astonishment.

"No," and she sighed, "mine was a mistake. It was my own fault. I married your Uncle Archibald to get out of playing *bézique* every evening with an aunt who lived with us, and who was stone-deaf, poor thing. It was difficult to make her understand what I had, and it was her habit to score my points as well as her own, so she invariably won. It was a small thing; but what annoyed me most was, I

AUNT MENELOPHE ON MARRIAGE.

had to pay a penny into a missionary-box for every game I lost, while she sat and chuckled. Your uncle turned up one night at an opportune moment. I had lost four games running, and my aunt's cheating had been excessive even for her. Before your uncle left that evening I was engaged to him. The shape of his nose was very good—pure Greek—but I never really loved him. Afterwards, poor man, he developed gout, and his temper became somewhat uncertain."

"But he loved you; he *must* have loved you," I interrupted.

"Yes, I believe he was very fond of me; but the trouble was I could not return his affection. He was a good man, but he bored me. Even the shape of his nose altered—it was the gout," she added in parentheses. "But he never knew; that was my one consolation. I did him a wrong when I married him, and the rest of my life I spent in trying to right it. It was exhausting at times, but I had my reward when he died."

"Aunt Menelophe!" I cried aghast.

"You misunderstand me, child: Strange to say, I felt his loss deeply. My reward lay in the knowledge that he never found me out. Something he said, just before he died, has always been a comfort to me." Her eyes became reminiscent, and I wondered would she repeat it. She did. "'Mene,' he said, 'you have been a good wife, and I have been a poor sort of husband. I was never

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

good enough for you, and could never understand how you could love me; but that you have loved me has been the greatest gift of my life, and I have thanked God for it every day.' A person with what is called a strict sense of honour would no doubt have promptly undeceived him; I didn't, and he died happy. Deceit is often infinitely preferable to aggressive honesty. Had I said, 'Archibald, you are mistaken; I have never loved you,' I should have felt that he would have been restless throughout eternity, gone wandering about with bare feet and catching his death of cold; and a man who has suffered from gout in this world deserves a little peace in the next."

She stared into the fire, and I could see that old memories were crowding in thick upon her. What a wonderfully expressive, beautiful face was hers, crowned with its soft white hair! And she had missed love; she had missed what she had once said was the best thing in life. Presently I asked—

"Aunt Menelophe, do you think you could have loved?"

She looked at me with a little smile.

"Most women can love, Hazel. I have not been an exception. Mine came too late; it was after I was married, and—he loved me. So my work was doubly hard, to crush the one, keep it down, trample on it, and—build up the other—foster and tend and encourage the small growth of affection I had

AUNT MENELOPHE ON MARRIAGE.

managed to raise towards my husband. It was very hard; but the man—he was good—helped me, we helped each other, and I suppose God helped us both."

"Did he ever marry?" I asked softly.

"No, he never married, and he is dead now. Men always die before women. It takes a great deal to kill us; women cling to life with the tenacity of a cat. You meet about one widower to every hundred widows, and then he marries again. I always contend that the Lord cannot love us as a sex, for He never seems to be in any hurry to summon us to His presence. I have told you my story—the small tragedy of my life—to make you think, pause, and consider well before either refusing or accepting an offer of marriage. Don't rush at a man; neither, on the other hand, be in too big a hurry to send him away. The moment he has gone for good you may regret it. Personally, I am of the opinion that girls of your age are unsuited for marriage; your hearts are in too wobbly and pulpy a condition. You never know your own minds, and you change in your opinions as rapidly as members of Parliament. Had I been a little older, I should never have married Archibald Menzies to escape playing *bézique* with an aunt, however deaf. But now tell me about this man; I believe I should like him. Describe him to me; I am very sensitive to looks. Is he big?"

"Yes," I said, "very: the kind of man who seems

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

to crowd a room, and he has a slow gait and heavy tread."

She nodded approvingly.

"And he has a deep voice and speaks slowly."

She nodded again.

"And does he think slowly?"

"Very slowly, so slowly that I try to help him out with it sometimes, and then he waves me on one side as though I were a gnat. His very wave is big and all-embracing."

"Better and better," cried Aunt Menelophe; "he sounds delightful. I like your big, slow of thought, slow of speech men; they wear well. The brilliant ones are so tiresomely alert, and full of themselves, and as to how they are impressing you, that you feel worn out after ten minutes of their society. Besides, they never listen to you, and there is nothing more annoying to a woman than not to be listened to. The less clever ones are much more companionable."

"But Mr. Inderwick is not stupid," I said quickly.

"No?"

"I should imagine his brain to be exceptionally solid and weighty. What should be the normal weight of a man's brain?"

"About fifty ounces—at least so Butterby says, but probably he has mixed up his figures with something in natural history."

"Well, presuming him to be correct, I am sure

AUNT MENELOPHE ON MARRIAGE.

Mr. Inderwick's brain must weigh sixty ounces at least," I said. "He seems to have literally absorbed knowledge. There is scarcely anything he does not know. He took all sorts of things at Oxford." I paused, trying to recollect his degrees, when Aunt Menelophe annoyed me by suggesting measles or typhoid. "Don't you want to hear about him?" I asked a little huffily, "or are you making fun of me?"

"I beg your pardon, Hazel," she said. "It was too bad to tease you, but you looked so pretty and earnest and thoughtful that—well, I really couldn't help it. Go on; I am deeply interested."

Somewhat mollified (it was nice to hear such a comforting description of one's self after Angela's pointed, personal remarks), I continued at some length.

"He seems to be a remarkable man," said Aunt Menelophe when I had finished, "but I don't like what you tell me of his brain. Any abnormal development usually signifies the verging on the borderland of insanity. Have you observed in him any marked eccentricities?"

"None whatever," I retorted.

"Well, don't get annoyed about it. The line of demarcation between genius and idiocy is very slight. Butterby, for instance, I am told, is a genius in his way, and yet at times I question his sanity. As I said before, this Mr. Inderwick seems a unique creation. Now, is he good? or, I should say, has he any vices?"

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

“He doesn’t drink, if that is what you mean.”

“You don’t think he would beat or kick his wife?”

“I’m convinced he wouldn’t,” I replied chillingly.

Aunt Menelophe laughed.

“Does he swear?”

I hesitated, and she laughed again.

“A little,” I confessed; “in fact, a good deal when he is put out.”

“That is not peculiar to him. It is when they are put out that men *do* swear. Have you corrected him for this bad habit?”

“Yes.”

“And has he improved?”

“He did not appear to hear me.”

“More and more am I attracted towards him. If you do not think me presumptuous, do you mind giving me your reason for refusing him, now that I know all about him?” She drew her chair nearer to the fire. I did not speak. “Perhaps you would rather not tell me?” she said gently.

“It is not that. I don’t mind; but it is difficult to put into words, and you will think me so small.”

“Not a bit of it,” she protested. “A girl either does or does not want to marry a man. A hair’s breadth may settle it one way or the other—a look, an expression, a word, a touch, a thought.”

“It’s his clothes—his ties and boots,” I murmured in a shamefaced manner. “It may seem petty and ridiculous to you; but he *is* so untidy.

AUNT MENELOPHE ON MARRIAGE.

He has worn the same old cap for months, and his coat—a Norfolk jacket—is green with age. He even wears it at church sometimes, and it is all wrinkly and out of shape. And he looks so nice when he is well dressed. You should have seen him at Mrs. Moss's party in his dress clothes. He looked almost distinguished, though his tie *was* round at the back of his neck most of the evening. And he never seems to know that his shirt-cuffs are frayed, and the day he proposed to me the inside of his tie was coming out."

I paused, for Aunt Menelophe was laughing. She signalled to me to stop, and then, quickly recovering herself, motioned me to go on, but I wouldn't.

"You are laughing at me again," I said, "and I don't wonder. It does sound small and ridiculous. Let us talk of something else. I have already said too much. You cannot understand; you are too broad-minded, too above such littleness, too—"

"Hazel Wycherley, if you say another word I shall slap you," she broke in. "Haven't I told you I am completely sympathetic with you. If a man had proposed to me when wearing such a tie I should—well, I should have told him to put on another, and then come back to me. A man has no right to go round proposing to nice girls looking like a rag-picker. But it is your face which upsets me. Do you know that you had such a worried expression on that one small face of yours that, had I not laughed, I should have been bound to weep

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

out of sheer sympathy. The whole of the cares and troubles of the world lay in your eyes as you spoke of that tie, and I can quite enter into your feelings. It is just these small things which irritate and disillusion a girl. She likes, and quite naturally, that her lover or husband should be smart and spick and span—not effeminate or foppish, but to be well shaved, well set up, and clean."

"He is not dirty," I said.

Her lips twitched.

"I was under the impression you said he was."

"You are mistaken. I said his clothes were old and shabby; but his linen—his collars and shirts—are scrupulously clean, and he shaves, and I know he has a bath every—"

I stopped in confusion, for Aunt Menelophe had retired behind a small fire-screen she was holding, and her body was undulating gently.

"Well?" she said in smothered accents. "The fire is burning my face. I am listening, go on."

"That is all," I said loftily. "I am tired of the subject."

She dropped the screen.

"Come and kiss me, child," she commanded, "at once."

I rose and did her bidding. She stroked my cheek for a moment or two.

"What a hot-tempered, touchy little girl it is," she said at length. "Do you fly out at Mr. Inderwick like this? I wonder he had the courage to

AUNT MENELOPHE ON MARRIAGE.

say anything to you. Those big men are so often shy."

I felt a little ashamed, but I made no reply. I was not going to be drawn further.

"Is he shy?" she asked softly.

"No," I answered.

"Well, then, I expect he is cheeky?"

"Perhaps."

She laughed.

"Aren't you going to forgive me?" she asked.
"I never meant to laugh, but—your describing his baths—"

"I did not," I broke in hotly. "It was only when you implied he was dirty. Rose, our housemaid—she is the daughter of old Crabby's cowman—it was she who told me. One cannot help hearing the village gossip."

"Of course not," said Aunt Menelophe. "Besides, such interesting information! What an extraordinary place Heatherland must be! Haven't the people any occupation?"

"Not much."

"How bad for them! So they discuss people's bathing?"

"They discuss *everything*. They know how many clean changes of linen we have a week, and that Angela wears her flannel petticoats ten days because of the shrinking. They know how many pounds of butter we consume in seven days, and that we have three-pennyworth of cream every Sunday to eat with

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

our fruit tart at dinner. The fact that Mr. Inderwick had accompanied me on a walk one day was buzzed round the entire village within twenty-four hours. And Sammy—Sammy, our old gardener—actually told me lately that I had every appearance of wanting to mate—those were his very words—that the villagers had noticed it, had seen it in my face, that I looked ‘pale and peaky-like.’ Wasn’t it horrible? Can you wonder at—at my refusing Robert Inderwick? They would say all sorts of dreadful things—that I had set my cap at him, that I had run after him, courted him, flattered him. Mrs. Oates would turn up the whites of her eyes, and her elastic-sided boots in, and say girls behaved very differently in *her* day; that then they were retiring and maidenly. She would have us believe she was a drooping, modest-sort-of-violet girl, with a heaving bosom and laboured breath, and we, knowing her, can’t; one’s credulity can be taxed too far—”

I paused for breath.

“So it is not the shabby clothes and disreputable tie and knotted bootlaces *only*,” interrupted Aunt Menelophe; “it is the world’s opinion, the little world of Heatherland! I should have thought you would have been above that. You care what Mrs. Oates says. You are going to refuse happiness because of an elastic-sided-booted woman in a village. You are going to cast away the best thing life has to offer you.”

AUNT MENELOPHE ON MARRIAGE.

“But I’m not,” and I stamped my foot. “Don’t I tell you I don’t love the man.”

“How do you know?”

I sat down wearily on the hearthrug.

“Aunt Menelophe, haven’t I just been telling you for the last quarter of an hour? Haven’t you listened?”

“I have listened. But you have not made your case out to my satisfaction. You say you don’t love Mr. Inderwick because he is shabby and untidy.”

“I didn’t say that,” I contradicted. “I said it proved I had no real affection for him, or such external trivialities would not affect me.”

“But that is where I differ from you. I think it is because you *do* care for him that these little matters worry you. They would me if I loved a man.”

I shook my head.

“But my heart never beats suffocatingly, and I don’t thrill all over like girls in love in books when the hero goes near them.”

Aunt Menelophe made a gesture of contempt.

“You talk like an infant,” she said. “You don’t understand, and if I explain to you, you will still probably not understand. Perhaps I am silly to try, but really you are so—so foolish. Now listen. That which is known as love is made up or composed of many elements. If I were a chemist I should probably have the correct names of these elements at my finger ends, but I’m not. I am just going

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

to divide love up roughly into two sections—the spiritual or mental, and the physical or emotional. A man's love, as a rule, certainly pertains more to the latter. I do not say that it is any better or worse for that, it is nothing to do with the question ; he loves in the way that Nature intended him to love. But a woman, on the other hand, loves more often with the mental side of her being than the physical ; and it is better so, it is Nature's safeguard. Besides, I think such love in a woman is more enduring, more lasting. I don't admire your southern type of woman who thrills and jumps, and has flashing eyes, and a stiletto concealed up her sleeve. Her love is passionate and all-absorbing at the moment, but does it last ? You won't understand, you are too young, but believe me that the thrills and heart jumps and suffocating sensations—the lack of which you complain about in regard to your feelings towards Mr. Inderwick—are the very least important qualifications necessary in the composition of a love which is beautiful and steadfast and enduring. What you have to ask yourself when in doubt is, ' Does this man bore me ? Does he tire me ? Does he irritate me ? Do I respect him ? Can I look up to him as I trust he will look up to me ? Shall I be ashamed of him ? And, above all, does the mere fact of his presence bring me complete contentment ; if it doesn't you are right in saying 'No.' "

" But it does—I think," I stammered.

" Well, then, why in the name of fortune have

AUNT MENELOPHE ON MARRIAGE.

you sent him about his business?" she snapped. "I cannot believe that because of his ties and Mrs. Oates's chatter and a scarcity of dynamite sensations on your part you would send such a nice man away."

"But I thought you said a few moments ago you sympathised with me, and that a hair's breadth would turn the scale of a girl's affection?"

"I was referring to foolish, empty-headed girls. I gave you credit for more sense."

"Aunt Menelophe, why are you so keen on my getting married?" I asked. "Now if you were a mother with five plain daughters—"

"Don't be impertinent," she said, tweaking my ear. "I don't want you to make a muddle of your life. I muddled mine, and I somehow feel you are going to muddle yours. I am convinced that you like this Inderwick man."

"And I'm convinced of this, that whether I love him or whether I don't, I'm not going to recall him. So there!"

"You are a pig-headed, obstinate minx," she remarked; "and if you were my daughter I would keep you on bread and water for a week. But here comes Butterby; he will probably ask you to give him back that beetle, he has talked of nothing else since you went."

I laughed and hugged her, and wondered if she were right and I wrong. Was I going to make a muddle of my life? Time would show..

CHAPTER XXII.

I RECEIVE ANOTHER OFFER OF MARRIAGE, AND
AM EXCEEDINGLY PERPLEXED.

Cousin Wellesley and Mr. Escourt have been here for thirteen and a half days, and since the particular Tuesday on which they arrived I have felt exactly like a railway train, full steam up, flying along at an express speed of sixty miles a minute, going whither I know not, and not daring to pause and think.

Is there no friendly signalman at hand to pull a lever and turn me on to the right track? For I can see two tracks ahead of me, and I don't know which to take. I am tired and frightened and full of apprehension. I want to slow down, to put on the brake, to turn off steam, and some force outside myself seems to be urging and propelling me along. It is only a few weeks since I felt like a thousand-year-old toad, a weary, lethargic toad, and now to be experiencing the sensations of an express train! It is a little rough on a girl.

“There is a Divinity that doth shape our ends,”
and I imagined this shaping would be carried out

I RECEIVE ANOTHER OFFER OF MARRIAGE.

quietly and methodically by gentle, easy stages. I never dreamed that I should be hustled and hustled in this insistent fashion, with a clamouring in my ears of "Make up your mind, take it or leave it, but don't vacillate." It is so ridiculous to say "don't vacillate" in that peremptory manner when such an important issue is at stake, when one false step may make or mar a life's happiness—nay, two lives.

Now if mother were here she would say, "Pray over it. Ask to be guided aright." I have known her take a wet wash day to God, and then with eyes of faith sit and watch a rift in the clouds; and I believe I should follow her advice if God were a woman—a woman might understand. I could say to Mary, had I been brought up in another faith, "Oh, Holy Mother, I am in a dire fix. Here are two men wanting to marry me, and I don't know which of the two I love.

"One, Robert Inderwick, I admire and respect because I know him to be good, and he would be good to me. He is slow-going, but would be faithful. He is careless of appearances, but in heart and mind a gentleman. He is downright in thought, speech and action, but gentle and tolerant towards the wobbly ones of this world. He is rugged and somewhat ugly, and wears coats of an aged aspect, calling to mind the gnarled, greeny boles of primeval forest trees, but his muscles are of abnormal development, and would do away with the necessity of

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

keeping a watch-dog on the premises. His ties are compassed about with cotton wool and thin places, and his bootlaces are full of knots, but his rare smile is better than the sun coming from behind a cloud on a dull winter's day.

"The other, Eustace Escourt, is the exact antithesis. He is brilliant and handsome, quick of speech, lithe and graceful, and faultlessly attired. His elegant patent boots contain trees and not human feet, and one can imagine that his trousers draw long breaths of relief at being released from the confining environment of a heavy mattress or the rack of a wire stretcher. In thirteen days I have seen him in as many ties. He always seems to wear the right thing in the right place in the right way. He is the type of man who would make a good bridegroom. Then his conversation is a revelation—it bewilders you. He says clever, strange things which seem to have quite half a dozen meanings, and he appears to take it for granted that you have grasped the lot in all their subtle entirety when you are hopelessly floundering about after *one*.

"I sit by him at dinner, and by the end of the meal I am in a mazed and dazed condition. I feel as though I had been in for an examination—my matriculation—or something equally horrible, and had just scraped through by the skin of my teeth, and, with a little gasp, I fall all of a flabby heap on to the drawing-room couch and fan two hectic spots

I RECEIVE ANOTHER OFFER OF MARRIAGE.

on my cheeks while sedulously endeavouring to evade Aunt Menelophe's glance. And yet he fascinates me—fascinates me. So, Holy Mother, help me if you can. Help me to choose between these two men, and so give me peace."

From the moment Eustace Escourt entered this house he has devoted himself absolutely to me, talked to me, walked with me, read to me, monopolised me. I have steeled myself against him a dozen times a day. I have reminded myself that I was the only girl in the house, and therefore it was quite natural that he should prefer my society to Butterby and his moths, or to Wellesley—whose temper is irritable after influenza, and who at present spends his time in being "picked up" by invalid delicacies, and playing *écarté* with Aunt Menelophe.

I have said to myself, "If there were another girl about the place you would go to the wall at once, or if Aunt Menelophe were twenty years younger and able to play golf and go for long walks you would be completely left out in the cold, so show a little pride and independence, and don't dance to his piping; he is only playing with you—amusing himself. He once said you were a little country girl, by which he meant a *gauche*, unsophisticated, bumpkinish sort of creature, to be drawn out and dissected for want of something better to do." So I have said firmly that I don't play golf, and have started off on a walk to think of—Robert, and

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

within ten minutes I am receiving my first lesson in putting and driving. I have refused curtly to take any interest in Browning, and five minutes later I am listening eagerly to his beautiful rendering of "Pippa Passes." By storm, stress and steam I have been whirled along, resisting yet yielding, fighting yet fascinated, drinking in all that he has told me of books, places, people, of that wonderful life in town—life lived to the uttermost; and now when I want to sit down and think calmly, dispassionately, weigh things up, commune with my heart, debate with my reason, look into the years to come, a voice keeps whispering, whispering into my ear—confusing me, perplexing me, alluring me with its seductiveness—"You, too, shall live this life, you shall know people, you shall meet brilliant men and women. You will no longer stagnate, you will no longer dwell like a rabbit in a hutch, a cow in a stall, a potato in a field, vegetating, rusting, drifting into a rustiness and commonplaceness which are worse than death. You will see great pictures and hear divine music. You will have your own salon and wear beautiful gowns. You are clever—you shall be educated; you are beautiful—your beauty shall be adorned; you are good, though that matters the least of all, and you shall learn that goodness and virtue are possible without the tiresome and old-fashioned restrictions of dogma and creed. You shall travel and see many strange and interesting places; there is nothing, in reason,

I RECEIVE ANOTHER OFFER OF MARRIAGE.

that you shall not do ; and—you shall live *every* moment of your life.”

Was ever a poor, weak girl more grievously tempted—a girl who believes in the old-fashioned theory of love, but who wants all these other things as well ?

And he spoke so beautifully and looked so handsome. There was only one little jarring note—that about goodness mattering the least of all. I am not good, I am not religious, but somehow those words hurt. I think if I were a man I should like a woman to be good.

The dressing-bell has gone—Aunt Menelophe’s maid has put out my white frock in readiness—it took all the money out of two of mother’s tin boxes and one purse to pay for that frock. Dear, kind old mother ! When—I mean if ever I should become rich, mother shall have her twelve drawing-room chairs covered with pink silk damask—she doesn’t approve of new-fangled tapestries—and the sofa and two easy-chairs shall also be covered, and they shall all have white chintz (with little pink flowers) covers to wear in summer, and so preserve the pink damask from fading, and dear mother will be happy.

I must hurry. In less than three-quarters of an hour I shall meet Eustace at dinner. He will crack me my walnuts, and he will talk to me. Breathlessly I shall follow him into that wonderful world of his, and he will touch lightly upon science and

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

religion and evolution, and things I had never so much as heard of till a fortnight ago; and he will give expression to thoughts and ideas which would cause mother and Angela to regard him in the light of an Antichrist, and fall upon their knees in prayer.

And then, afterwards—I have promised to meet him in the library and give him my answer. Butterby interrupted us this afternoon; Butterby gave me this blessed hour of respite. He came in to *borrow* the beetle; I know I shall never see it again.

“By all means, dear Butterby; I will go for it,” I said.

Eustace caught me as I was slipping out of the room.

“Come here to-night after dinner,” he whispered.

I nodded. I was afraid Butterby might hear him; but he was engrossed in a picture of British moths which hung upon the wall, and which is an everlasting source of interest to that extraordinary young man.

And what am I going to say? What is to be my answer. The voice keeps on clamorously, persistently: “Make up your mind. For Heaven’s sake cease vacillating and wobbling. You are old enough to make your own decision.” Then another voice breaks in enticingly: “You shall live every moment of your life; you shall cease to vegetate, rust, drift into commonplaceness, if you will consent

I RECEIVE ANOTHER OFFER OF MARRIAGE.

to come with me." And now a third comes along: "I have offered you all I have, Hazel. It may not be very much, but there it is. . . . My love for you could not be measured by any ordinary standard of cubic feet or inches; it is too big, but you refuse it all."

Ah, me! Why was I born a woman?

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

It seems so material to touch upon one's own earthly affections when your soul is uplifted, and you are carried out of yourself by the glowing and impassioned thought and language of a passage almost inspired.

Aunt Menelophe came into the room just as we were—finishing our talk. She stood and stared at us as though she had discovered some new species.

“So this is what you are up to!” she remarked.

A schoolmaster, on the track of small boys stealing apples, would probably adopt the same tone on running them to earth.

Eustace rose and offered her a chair. His manners are perfect.

“Yes,” he said, smiling, “this is what we are up to, Mrs. Menzies. I have just asked your niece to be my wife, and I trust that I have your sympathy and approval in so doing.”

“Have you accepted him?”

She turned on me with a pounce.

I nodded.

“God bless my soul!” she ejaculated, and there did not seem to be anything suitable by way of reply. “Well,” she went on, “Eustace Escourt, you have not lost much time. You are what I should describe as a fairly rapid young man.”

“I invariably make my decisions with a certain degree of rapidity, Mrs. Menzies. Men are unlike women in that respect.”

She gave a little snort.

I ENGAGE MYSELF TO EUSTACE ESCOURT.

“Women look before they leap.”

“Are you implying that I have neglected to do so, for it sounds a little—a little rude to Miss Wycherley? Believe me I have considered the question carefully, and have every confidence in the future.”

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking of you,” Aunt Menelophe retorted somewhat discourteously. “You’re all right. It was Hazel I was worried about.”

“Indeed!” He smiled, but there was that drawl in his voice which is always to be heard when he is in any way moved.

“She is young and impetuous, and she has only known you for a fortnight. I had no idea this was going on.”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Menzies, but you must be a little shortsighted. I should have thought the least observant would have noticed the marked attentions I was paying your niece. I am extremely sorry that you should feel I have stolen a march upon you.”

“Of course you paid her attention, she is an attractive girl,” snapped Aunt Menelophe; “but—I have always understood from Wellesley that you were not a marrying man.”

“Neither was I till I met Miss Wycherley.” There was a studied calmness about him which made me feel nervous. “You should not have put temptation in my way.”

“I didn’t,” she contradicted; “it was just an accident.”

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

“Well, at any rate,” he persisted, “now that Hazel has consented to be my wife, I hope you have no objection. You have known me for many years; my income is good, my reputation, I trust, is good; my position will enable me to keep a wife in comfort if not luxury. May I venture to hope that we have your congratulations?”

“Oh, yes, *you* have.”

There was just the faintest emphasis on the pronoun which made me look fearfully at Eustace, but he did not appear to notice it.

“Thanks,” he said with a smile. “Now I feel more comfortable. You have not been too encouraging, Mrs. Menzies.”

“She knows nothing of your world. I have not wished to be unsympathetic, but she has been brought up simply.”

“That is what makes her so attractive,” he replied.

“I hope you are not forgetting I am here,” I suggested quietly.

They laughed, and Aunt Menelophe rose.

“Come to my room by and by,” she said; “I want to talk to you. And Eustace,” turning to him, “I suppose you are going to see Hazel’s mother?”

“Certainly, but I shall be obliged to run up to town first on business; then I hope to go to Heatherland and make Mrs. Wycherley’s acquaintance.”

My heart gave a jump as he said this. He was going to Heatherland, and—Robert would know.

I ENGAGE MYSELF TO EUSTACE ESCOURT.

"Need you go to see mother?" I asked nervously. "I think I would like our engagement to be kept quiet for two or three months. You see, I might—I might not know my own mind, as Aunt Menelophe says. I might wish to break off our engagement. Of course, I have no intention of doing anything of the kind, but—well, one never knows."

He looked at me in surprise—almost in displeasure.

"That is rather an extraordinary thing to say to a man to whom you have been engaged exactly half an hour."

"Of course I'm only in fun," I said, laughing. "You must try to understand when I'm joking."

"I don't care for that sort of joke, little girl," he said, drawing me to him.

I eluded his embrace; somehow I didn't feel like that.

"I must go to Aunt Menelophe," I murmured. "She will be waiting for me. Good-night," and in a twinkling I was across the hall and up the staircase.

"I don't think you were very kind to Eustace, Aunt Menelophe," I said, as I entered her room.

Her reply was to motion me to a low chair in front of the fire and hand me a cup of cocoa which she had just made on her little spirit stove. I accepted both with gratitude. My cheeks were burning and my hands and feet were icy. Getting

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

engaged is rather agitating work. She watched me drink the cocoa, then she rang for her maid.

“Parkins, bring Miss Wycherley’s dressing-gown, comb and brush, and woolly shoes,” she commanded.

“How did you know my head ached?” I asked a little wearily, as she passed me her salts and some Florida water.

“Emotional people’s heads always ache when they shouldn’t and it is necessary for them to keep their wits about them,” she replied.

“Are you suggesting that mine have been wandering?”

“By no means. Have you not just landed a man with five thousand a year?”

I sprang to my feet.

“Aunt Menelophe, I did not think you would have said that to me. Good-night.”

I nearly knocked Parkins over as I bounced towards the door.

“Sit down, Hazel,” said Aunt Menelophe imperatively. “Don’t be ridiculous. Parkins, take Miss Wycherley’s hair down and brush it for a few minutes, and then you can go. Miss Wycherley is tired and overwrought, and wants soothing.”

“Yes, m’m,” said Parkins, regarding me as though I were some wild animal at the Zoo.

I fretted and fumed as she fumbled about for the hairpins and stuck her cold fingers into the nape of my neck; but when she once got to work with the

I ENGAGE MYSELF TO EUSTACE ESCOURT.

brush, the sensation was rather pleasant and soothing than otherwise.

“Your ‘air is very thick and long, miss.”

“Yes,” I replied; “I know all about it, Parkins.”

“You find it troublesome to manage sometimes, miss.”

“Very, Parkins. I have been on the point of chopping it off at least a dozen times.”

I could feel her horrified countenance through the back of my head.

“There is a bit of tangle here, miss,” was her next cheering communication.

“I am all of a tangle, Parkins. Your information does not surprise me.”

“Indeed, miss!”

“Yes,” and I heaved a deep sigh.

“Shall I try and get it out, miss? It won’t hurt you.”

“But it does,” I said with a yell, and Parkins shot to the other side of the room.

“That will do,” said Aunt Menelophe; “you can go now,” and Parkins went, casting furtive looks behind her.

“I will see what *I* can do,” said Aunt Menelophe, taking up the comb and brush, and I was instantly transported to heaven. Her touch was as balm in Gilead, and it felt as though, with exquisitely gentle fingers, each of my jangled, tired nerves was smoothed out and set at rest.

“How delicious!” I murmured. “I will forgive you everything, Aunt Menelophe.”

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

She laughed.

"Thanks," she said dryly. "I was unaware that my behaviour called for such magnanimity on your part."

"After such a remark to which you gave utterance not ten minutes since?"

"I was merely voicing what will be the sentiments of the world when your engagement is made known. I may say at once that I do not participate in them. My opinion of you is somewhat better."

"The world is rarely kind to a woman, it would seem."

"I don't know," answered Aunt Menelophe. "It is often a source of surprise to me how very decent the world *is* to women; for some of them are fluffy bits of inanity, and they are for ever hankering after something they can't get. It frequently puzzles me to know what they *do* want; I don't think they know themselves. They indulge in huge aspirations and longings for something outside their environment. They say they feel like skylarks cramped in a small cage, and want to stretch their wings and fly; and they talk of liberty and life with a big L, and hanker after congenial work. Now if the whole truth were known, I am of the opinion they don't want to work at all. They are idle, and anxious to dodge the few duties of home life. What they want are husbands and a good time generally. It is quite remarkable when women *do* find their congenial work how quickly they tire of it, and then they

I ENGAGE MYSELF TO EUSTACE ESCOURT.

cry out their strength is not sufficient to stand it. Women are such humbugs!"

"But don't you think any of them are in earnest?"

"A few here and there—the really plain ones and the really clever ones," she replied, as she put down the brush and comb and drew up a chair to the fire.

"Are not you a little hard on them?" I asked.

Her face became soft and tender at once.

"I don't mean to be. I am really very sorry for women, not for the upper and middle classes—they have a pretty good time on the whole—but the poor working women. My heart aches for them. What lives they lead! But I did not invite you up here for a psychological discussion on the relative positions of women in the world. I want to speak of the affairs of the heart of one particular girl I know. I am glad you have found such a ready solution to your difficulties; I am glad you have found—love."

"Thanks," I said.

She looked at me quickly.

"You must feel so thankful that your heart dictated to you aright in prompting you to refuse Robert Inderwick. You might have been carried away by his sincere love for you. Girls are tender-hearted creatures. Your instincts were admirable; the shabby ties have not played you false. You should sing a *Te Deum* out of gratitude. Happiness

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

lies before you—love and place and power. You cannot fail to be blissful with these three, and the greatest of these is love."

My mouth became dry.

"You did not sound so pleased about it downstairs, Aunt Menelophe. In fact, as I remarked before, I think you were almost discourteous to Eustace."

"I was taken by surprise. I felt annoyed at my own blindness and want of perspicacity. No woman enjoys having it brought home to her that her denseness, especially in the matter of a love affair, has been colossal. Here was I taking it that you were really deeply attached to this Inderwick, and there were you falling violently in love with my guest."

I shuffled. Aunt Menelophe could be intensely irritating on occasions.

"I am tired," I said; "I think I will go to bed."

She kissed me warmly.

"Good-night, dear child; needless to tell you to sleep well. It is sorrow and anxiety that keep people awake."

And I never closed my eyes the whole blessed night.

CHAPTER XXIV.

I HAVE SOME LITTLE DIFFERENCES WITH EUSTACE.

EUSTACE has returned from London. I had no time to miss him, as Aunt Menelophe insisted upon my writing to tell mother of my engagement, and it took me exactly two days to do this. The waste paper basket bulged and overflowed at the end of the first day. How could I make her comprehend that I felt I knew and understood a man sufficiently in less than fourteen days to undertake to marry him. Mother is old-fashioned. She believes in a man speaking first to the parents, and then courting the daughter in a back-parlour sort of way. I don't think for a moment father did anything of the kind. Mother will tell you all about her acquaintance with him — up to a certain point, and then she becomes reserved.

As I sit writing I occasionally pause, and negligently pass my left hand over my hair. In the mirror opposite I can see what appears to be like unto a huge dewdrop of great brilliancy, sparkling and flashing in the sunshine.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

It seems incredible that this wondrous jewel should belong to me, who still own and wear (certainly under compulsion) an exceeding ancient, brown, stuffy frock which has seen many summers, and at the moment hangs in my wardrobe at home in readiness for the spring-cleaning. But it will be for the last time. No more spring-cleanings and ugly brown frocks, but salons and Liberty gowns—for did he not say I should have a salon and wear beautiful dresses?

To be strictly truthful, I don't think I should care to undertake a salon. I was under the impression such things were only held by radiantly beautiful or wonderfully brilliant women, who gathered around them, as flies after a jam-pot, ambassadors and cabinet ministers, and from whom they extracted diplomatic and political state secrets of great importance, such as: The alliance of the South Sea Islands and the North Pole with Germany; or that a discovery had been made of the King's intrigue with the Duke of Buckingham's chamber-maid, and that the Duke was levying blackmail upon the King, thereby rendering the latter exceedingly unhappy. Then I suppose there are the literary and artistic salons held by emaciated, green-robed women, looking like so many garden leeks touched by a frost. I wonder which Eustace would wish me to queen—a political, artistic or literary. I don't like the sound of any. I think I shall refuse a salon altogether. I want to enjoy

SOME LITTLE DIFFERENCES WITH EUSTACE.

life; but I must go carefully, for I find Eustace just the tiniest bit "difficult." I know it is my fault: I have always been sensitive, and it troubles me to think we have already had two little quar-differences. But he laughed when I said so, and quoted something about "O blessings on the falling out," which did not comfort me in the least.

Our first words were about the ring. It is really magnificent, and I felt he would say something beautiful and appropriate as he slipped it on to my finger, and it came somewhat as a shock when he remarked how brown my hand was, that there was no mistake about my living in the country, and I must see what could be achieved with a good toilet cream.

I felt myself stiffen, and unbidden the thought came to me that Robert would not have said that; but I thrust it from me—this was not the moment to think of another man. After all, it was absurd to expect your lover to think you perfect.

"I am sorry you disapprove of brown hands," I remarked tentatively, "because I never wear gloves in summer. It would be dreadful not to be able to crumble the warm, brown earth with your bare fingers, or allow the hot, yellow sand on the shore to trickle through them, or dabble them in the little, cool streams, or gather flowers. Surely you agree with me it would be a desecration to pick little velvety, soft-cheeked, wild flowers wearing stuffy kid gloves?"

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

“Oh, well, you won’t be able to indulge in those delights in town.”

He spoke quite gently and kindly, but I understood that he meant my hands were to grow white somehow, and my heart sank at the prospect.

“We shan’t always live in town, shall we?” I asked.

“The greater part of the year. I am not happy away from London. But we shall go abroad—to the Riviera and places where people do go, but nowhere where you will be free to make your mud pies,” and he laughed.

“And won’t you ever go to a quiet place, where we can poke about and find lovely things?”

“What kind of things?” he questioned.

“Oh, beautiful growing things in the fields and hedges, little roots and ferns and flowers—the banks teem with them; and the pools are full of dear, little water-beetles and long-legged flies which shoot about in ridiculous fashion; and there are the fish which rise to the surface on warm, sunny afternoons and lie on their backs and bask in the shallows; and nests in the spring—have you ever seen a wren’s nest? It is a miracle of mossy cosiness. You sally forth in search of one on a sunny, springy, clear afternoon, when the white clouds are very high up, and all the hedges and tree-tops are flushed with a delicious, tender green, and you——”

I came to a dead stop, for Eustace was actually drumming on the window-pane.

SOME LITTLE DIFFERENCES WITH EUSTACE.

"You are very enthusiastic," he said. "I had no idea you were so poetical."

There was a suppressed amusement in his tone which irritated me. I did not laugh at him when he raved about Browning.

"That is not poetry," I answered with a flash; "that is Nature."

He raised his eyebrows.

"What is the difference?"

"The difference is—" I hesitated. "Why poetry is the art of expressing in beautiful language a beautiful idea, and Nature is a beautiful reality—the outcome of the imagination of God."

"Indeed! I am learning something. And which of the two do you prefer?"

"Why Nature of course," I replied, now feeling sure of my ground. "Don't you?"

"No," he said, "I don't think I do. Nature is frequently most unsatisfactory, but true poetry never is."

"But surely you would prefer sitting on a gate listening to the song of a lark than to Shelley's ode to it?"

"It would depend on the gate and the day. Skylarks, I believe, are at their best in March and April, when the wind invariably cuts you to pieces."

I laughed.

"But their music *is* glorious," I said.

"That may be so, but Shelley's language is an

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

inspiration. The beauty of his language surpasses, to my thinking, the beauty of the note of any bird."

I shook my head.

"You are wrong," I said emphatically.

To my great surprise, his face darkened.

"These are early days to be putting me right," he retorted with a light laugh. "I am not to have so plastic a pupil as I expected—eh, little girl?"

"Indeed, I never meant or wished to put you right," I said vehemently. "I am not clever enough; you know that. You are always sounding the depths of my ignorance, and—and I cannot make out, under the circumstances, why you should wish to marry me."

"That is the very reason I do want to marry you. You are what I have been—unconsciously—searching for: someone fresh and unprejudiced and malleable, and here I find you with quite pronounced views."

"What does malleable mean?" I asked, ignoring the latter part of his remark.

"It means something soft and yielding and pliable, or literally that which may be beaten out by a hammer."

"I don't think I want to be malleable," I said, laughing.

"It is preferable to being opinionated and dogmatic," he answered.

"You like backboneless jelly-fish?"

He smiled, showing his white, even teeth.

"If you like to put it that way; but I think it

SOME LITTLE DIFFERENCES WITH EUSTACE.

would be more picturesque to say that I like my little girl to be soft and sweet, and young and open to conviction."

I, too, began to drum on the window-pane. Then the funny side of it struck me; to imagine myself soft and sweet and yielding was more than I could stand, and I began to chuckle softly.

He looked at me in displeasure, and my chuckle broke into a laugh. He frowned and took up a newspaper, and, seating himself in an armchair, began to read. The winter sunshine, streaming through the window, played amongst his neat, well-brushed hair, and on to his white, shiny collar. It struck me that he was really exceedingly good-looking, and the frown suited him.

"Do you know," I remarked pleasantly, "you are awfully like a man in a play. I can't describe the sort of man I mean, but he is—well, he is just like you."

His attitude seemed to be endeavouring to explain to me that he was unconscious of my presence; but I am of an amiable and forgiving disposition at times, so I went closer to him.

"The man is rather nice," I added.

Still no notice. He crossed one brown-booted, heather-mixture leg and foot over another, and studied the leader with great absorption.

"Eustace!" with great effort I made my voice plaintive and—malleable. "Eustace, won't you speak to me?"

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

No notice. A silence as of the dead pervaded the room, and the clock's ticking was simply aggressive.

Then I became angry, and, marching out of the room, banged the door to behind me. I would show him that two could play at that game. If he were going to sulk and be angry about nothing at all, what would he be like when there was a real cause for it?

Straightway I went to Wellesley and invited him to play golf. I am getting quite fond of Wellesley now that his influenza irritability is vanishing. He is not in the least like that which my imagination had conjured up as a newspaper-man ; for he is quite clean and well-dressed, and seems to like other people to talk. It is easy to see he is Aunt Menelophe's favourite of her three sons, and he is just devoted to her.

“Isn't she a beautiful, old mother?” he asked me one day before her ; and when I nodded she told us not to make so much noise as she wanted to have her afternoon nap, but there was an expression in her eyes, as they rested upon Wellesley, which brought a tight feeling into my throat. I hope when I am old I shall be the possessor of a big son who will be proud of me.

Wellesley looked rather astonished at my invitation.

“Where's Escourt?” he asked.

“He's reading,” I replied, going scarlet.

SOME LITTLE DIFFERENCES WITH EUSTACE.

“Phew!” he ejaculated, and then whistled.

“Would you rather not play?” I inquired with dignity.

“I would like it above all things, little cousin, but—Escourt. Won’t he mind? He’s a funny chap.”

“I don’t think he will mind,” I said steadily; “and if he does it—can’t be helped.”

My cousin whistled again—*The Dead March in Saul*, which was not inspiriting.

“Well, I’m going,” I said. “I will have a round by myself,” and I walked off.

“Wait a moment,” shouted Wellesley. “Give a fellow a chance. I *must* put on my boots.”

“You’ll take all the responsibility now,” he said as we walked to the links. “Escourt’s got a queer temper, though he is my pal and—and a—a very decent chap,” he added. (Wellesley’s more like a great boy than a man of thirty, and he’s very tactless.)

“Why, I might be suggesting that we should run off and get married,” I said with asperity, “instead of a simple round of golf. If Eustace wants a game he knows where to find us: he must have seen us pass the library window.”

“All right, all right,” sang Wellesley. “I’m game for anything if you’ll take the risks. Now will you tee off?”

We had a jolly morning, and I made two splendid drives and only lost three balls.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

As we were returning from the links I espied Eustace in the distance coming towards us. The fresh air had blown away all my annoyance and pique, and cheerfully I waved my clubs and called to him. It was far too glorious a day to quarrel with your lover; but in the midst of my friendliest "Coo-oo!" he raised his cap, and deliberately turning on his heel walked back to the house.

"You've done it," said Wellesley cheerfully. "I told you so."

Now I could have thumped Wellesley with one of the clubs, for a man to say "I told you so" is base in the extreme; and it was with great strength of purpose that I held myself well in hand.

"I should run after him if I were you," was his next brilliant suggestion. It is hard to believe Wellesley earns his living by journalism.

"Wellesley," I said, turning on him, "please understand I have never in my life run after a man, and I don't intend to begin, so kindly suggest something more feasible."

"Can't," said he feebly; "I'm not imaginative."

"Well, then, don't say anything," I said, at which he began to whistle *The Dead March*.

Aunt Menelophe was coming down the stairs as we entered the house.

"Where's Eustace?" she inquired.

I told her I didn't know.

"Don't know?" she repeated.

"No," I said.

SOME LITTLE DIFFERENCES WITH EUSTACE.

Every feature of her face thereupon expressed that special brand of surprise which betokens shortness of breath. I began to walk upstairs. *The Dead March in Saul* stole gently after me, accompanied by Aunt Menelophe's laboured breathing, but I did not look round. It was absurd to show such astonishment at my merely declining, in these early days of our engagement to be Eustace's keeper.

I went to my room, dashed cold water over my face, wrestled with my wind-blown hair, looked at Eustace's photograph, and went down to lunch feeling excessively firm. Eustace was already in his place, and with his customary politeness pulled out my chair, found my serviette—which invariably leaves me during meals, preferring to rest on the carpet beneath the table—handed me the salt and pepper, and then returned to his lunch.

Twice I made attempts at conversation, but it is difficult to talk to a man who replies in monosyllables, so turning my back on him I devoted myself to Aunt Menelophe, who sat with an amused twinkle in her eye and a little smile at the corner of her lips.

But I was not happy; I own up to it that I was wretched. It was all so small and absurd, and down in my heart I felt frightened. To what had I engaged myself? I had been led to understand that lovers' quarrels were amusing and entertaining. I did not find this in the least so, and I felt I was

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

being made ridiculous in the eyes of my relations and the servants.

As soon as Aunt Menelophe rose I made quickly for the door, and vanished up the stairs to my room. I would write a long letter to mother, and then I would read Browning. I thought of Robert and smiled. He said I should read Browning and talk of him, but I wouldn't do that for—his sake. I started—what on earth was I saying? A nasty little uncomfortable twinge, not exactly of pain, but of—of loneliness, shot through me. How nice it would be if—Robert were here to go for a walk, just a friendly walk. He always understood me so well, and our very silences seemed like interesting conversations. He never made talk, and—and he was such a sympathetic listener. A tear stole down my cheek; I knew I was a fool, but that tear relieved the tension. I felt I would like a real good cry—I had not had one since the day Robert had told me of his love—but I must not give way to it. Eustace would think I had been crying about him, and that was insupportable. He was a horrid, conceited—

A knock came at the door, and a note was handed in by Parkins. I tore it open.

“MY DEAREST GIRL,

“Will you come down to the library? I want to talk to you. You looked unhappy at lunch. Perhaps I was a little severe with you. I forget how young you are, and that your temper is a

SOME LITTLE DIFFERENCES WITH EUSTACE.

little ungoverned. It was not wise of you to go off this morning ; but I will forgive you, so come at once.

“Yours ever, E. E.

“P.S.—I have been quite lonely, dearest.”

I went to him. It was that P.S. that did it ; the rest of the note I did not like. He was very sweet and nice, and made me feel quite ashamed of myself. Now I come to think of it, it *was* rude of me to drum on the window-pane and giggle without explaining the cause of my amusement, and I have really forgotten now what I *did* laugh at. But we made friends, and had a very happy afternoon. Eustace is really splendid company, and he never seems to get tired of talking. Hitherto, as a rule, I have done most of the talking, and my friends have listened ; but now the order of things is reversed. Eustace talks and I listen. He is so clever, and so anxious to teach me that I cannot but be grateful to him. I could wish though that he would suggest easier and lighter books for my delectation than *The Origin of Species* and *First Principles* ; and it was so much nicer to feel that I was a direct descendant of Adam than that, by various intricate and complicated stages, I had evolved from something horrid and unpleasant like a jelly-fish. But he is so happy when he is pointing out to me our intimate resemblance to fish and birds, and frogs and snails, that I wouldn’t interrupt him for the world.

CHAPTER XXV.

A WALK IN THE RAIN, AND EUSTACE TALKS RUSKIN.

EUSTACE and I have spent a peaceful though somewhat dull day.

In the morning it poured with rain, and we sat in the library and read *Sesame and Lilies*, and Eustace drew my special attention to "Queen's Gardens" and the noble and beautiful and elevating suggestions there set forth for the guidance and help of women who desire to be pure and cultured and self-reliant. He was a little put-out at my frequent yawning; but, as I explained to him, it was nothing to do with the book. I always yawn on wet days; it is the damp. He said it was a curious and unfortunate habit, and I agreed with him.

Butterby returned the beetle to me at lunch. He seemed unwilling to let it go, and kept drawing away his hand—just as I was taking it—to examine some fresh point of interest in it. I asked him, in a kind voice, if he wouldn't like to keep it for good, and he replied—

"Certainly not. A present is a present, but do be very careful with it; it is a unique specimen, and very valuable."

EUSTACE TALKS RUSKIN.

I suggested having it insured, and he said—
“Eh! What’s that?”

I told him again, and after some little consideration he said he did not think any company would take it. I pointed out patiently that I did not wish any company to take it, but to insure it against loss or theft, and he went on with his lunch as though he had not heard me. I am sure Butterby is a little deaf.

In the afternoon it was still pouring, and Eustace taught me chess. He spoke of it as an intellectual pastime, and it seemed a suitable description. I think it is the dullest, dreariest, most complicated game I ever came across. Half an hour at the moves gave me a splitting headache, and I was obliged to borrow Aunt Menelophe’s eau-de-cologne and lie down. The only thing I remember of the game is that “Gambit” is a word derived from the Italian *gambetto*—a tripping up of the heels. The expression took my fancy; it sounds so nice and light-hearted.

I felt a little better after tea, and suggested we should go for a walk. Eustace seemed very surprised, and said it was still raining and nearly dark, and that he thought it would be very unpleasant.

I told him I felt obliged to go out in the fresh air once a day for the sake of my health, and that I did not mind the rain, as I had a stout waterproof and a pair of goloshes. I spoke with unusual firm-

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

ness, for I noticed that he had again reached Ruskin from the bookcase.

Unwillingly he came with me, and he was right—it was not a pleasant day, though I felt it was preferable to being cooped up any longer in the library. The rain and damp had caused the whole of the smoke and smuts of the Potteries to condense into a heavy, black pall, which hung over Blongton like some menacing, evil spirit. In an unguarded moment I pointed it out to Eustace before turning our steps away from the town, and he immediately began again to talk about Ruskin. He spoke of the great teacher's dream of a Utopia—socially, morally, physically; of a land purged of railways, machinery, smoke, and dirt; of an art which was beautiful only when truthful, natural, pure, and earnest.

I enjoyed it all so much at first. It was so comforting, as we splashed through the sticky, black mud, to dwell on the beauty of anything, and Eustace's language was really very fine. But, after a time, my thoughts must have wandered, for it was with a violent start I came back to earth by hearing Eustace ask me to take off my goloshes and he would throw them over the hedge.

“My goloshes,” I murmured dazedly.

“Haven't you been listening to me?” he asked reproachfully.

“Oh, yes,” I said hurriedly. “You were speaking of smokeless fires and pure air.”

“That was some time ago. For the last ten

EUSTACE TALKS RUSKIN.

minutes I have been dwelling on the artistic and beautiful side of woman's dress, and I was remarking that your goloshes were such an eyesore it would be as well to remove them."

"Remove my goloshes?" I repeated stupidly.

"Yes," he said, a shade impatiently. "You must admit they are not beautiful. I expect you wear them from force of habit—been brought up to them in the country; but they are not necessary if your boots are stout."

"But they're not; I should catch my death of cold," I said.

"Oh, well, I don't want you to do that," he said somewhat grudgingly. "But in future you will have stouter boots for my sake, won't you?"

I laughed.

"If you wish it," I said; "but what—what an original man you are, Eustace. It seems so funny to mind a thing like a pair of goloshes."

"Yes, I have always been considered a little original," he replied, taking my arm, "and I am glad you are willing to meet me in the matter. It shows a nice, yielding spirit."

"Oh, I never mind giving in about little things that don't matter," I said cheerfully, and I was surprised to see a shade of annoyance pass over his face; but I did not appear to notice it, and asked him if he could teach me the correct pronunciation of *Don Quixote*, which he very kindly did, and a lot of other things as well.

CHAPTER XXVI.

**EUSTACE ANNOYS ME, AND I RETIRE TO MY
ROOM TO SEW.**

I AM sitting up in my room gently fuming at Eustace. We have been engaged barely a week, and we have just quarrelled for the third time.

Now if we had been married a year, I might have looked upon it as a natural and laudable desire to wish to fling things at Eustace's head. But an engagement of a week's standing! Surely there must be something wrong.

And, of course, it is all his fault. I have been reading Jeremy Taylor and trying to delude myself into believing that it is mine; but I know it isn't. A man who is engaged to a girl has no right to speak so to her; and when I look back upon the provocation given, I marvel at the restraint I showed.

We had been out for a drive in the dog-cart. The afternoon for the time of the year was perfect, with thousands of little, white cloudlets sailing along in a turquoise-blue velvet sky. Eustace drives well, and as we ripped along with the fresh wind blowing in our faces, my spirits, which had been depressed,

EUSTACE ANNOYS ME.

went up with a rush. I love driving, and I love the fresh wind and the white clouds and quiet fields. I was gay, and Eustace expansive, and all went as merry as a marriage bell till our return home, when in getting out he said suddenly, "Not that foot first. How ignorant! Surely you know better?" His voice was so sharp and displeased that in my flurry and agitation I *fell* out, and scraped my hands and barked my knees on the sharp gravel. I picked myself up quickly, expecting to find him simply overcome with remorse, when to my intense chagrin all he said was—

"You really must be more careful. Of course if you get out of a carriage with the wrong foot foremost you must expect to fall. I am very sorry, dear, but it will be a lesson to you in future."

I stared at him for a moment dumbfounded; angry tears rushed to my eyes. How *could* he speak so?

I stalked into the house without vouchsafing any reply.

The gong had just sounded for tea, and Aunt Menelophe was crossing the hall to the drawing-room.

"Look where you are going, Hazel; don't walk over me," she said. "What is the matter?"

"Aunt Menelophe," I answered, "I simply detest men."

"Already?" she said, laughing. "I knew it would come sooner or later, but this is earlier than I expected."

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

“What do you mean?” I asked, clutching at her arm.

“I mean exactly what I say; but I should prefer your not pinching me. Come and have some tea.”

“Of course I was only generalising.”

“Of course,” she agreed.

Eustace came in a few minutes later with beautifully brushed hair, and handed me muffins in the friendliest fashion. He was evidently quite unaware that I was having a deadly quarrel with him; and is there anything more exasperating than to be at loggerheads with a person who is oblivious of the fact? He made a healthy tea, and talked to Aunt Menelophe of Wedgewood pottery.

“Are you coming to the library, dear?” he asked when we had finished tea and were alone.

“No,” I said.

“You would prefer staying here?”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“Where, then, would you like to go?” he persisted in a patient voice.

“I am going to my room. There is a fire there.” My tones were chilling.

“Won’t that be a little dull?” he asked.

“Not at all. I usually prefer my own society to that of my fellow creatures.”

“But of course there are exceptions?” he queried with a smile. “You are probably referring to women?”

“On the contrary,” I retorted, “I find women

EUSTACE ANNOYS ME.

infinitely more entertaining than men. Aunt Menelophe—now could you mention a man more interesting and delightful than she?"

"Mrs. Menzies is a charming woman, but—yes, certainly I *have* met one or two men who—" He twisted his moustache and glanced at himself in a mirror.

I got up and walked towards the door.

"Are you really going?" he said querulously. "I was looking forward to this little, quiet time before dinner. I have something I want to read to you—Flaubert's *Salammbô*. The writing is magnificent—such vivid colouring. It is a classic in its way. Probably you don't know it? Your reading does not appear to have been extensive."

"No," I replied, "I don't know it, and if it is a classic it is sure to be dull, and I know I shall hate it."

He looked positively shocked.

"I don't like to hear you speak so," he said, "even in fun."

"I'm not in fun," I retorted. "I feel more like *Molly Bawn* or *Comin' Thro' The Rye*. I adore *Comin' Thro' The Rye*. I'll stay if you'll read me some of that, the bit where Paul proposes to Nell."

He smiled.

"You *will* have your little joke," he said. "They are pretty little stories. But come, take off your hat, and we'll begin *Salammbô*."

"I'm not joking," I almost shouted. His tone

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

of command irritated me beyond endurance. "I won't listen to *Salamander*, and I'm going to pack."

"Pack!" he echoed. "Pack what?"

"My clothes, of course."

"But why should you wish to pack your clothes?"

"To go home," I replied. "You say you are going to see mother, and I have written to tell her of our engagement, and of course she'll be expecting us."

"But I have changed my mind," he observed calmly. "It is an old-fashioned piece of etiquette this going to ask the parent's consent, especially when the daughter is dowerless." (I thought it would have shown a nicer and more refined feeling if he had suppressed this last.) "I am sure Mrs. Wycherley will see this, and Heatherland, from what you tell me, appears to be an excessively dull, provincial, little village."

"Heatherland is charming," I said. "We have the river Dee and the blue Welsh mountains ever at hand to cheer us on our way. No village could be designated as 'provincial,' to my thinking, with two such possessions."

"Oh, indeed!" he commented.

"No; and besides, mother will be expecting you. I told her you were going, and she'll be so disappointed. At this moment the spare room will be undergoing a thorough cleansing, the whole house will reek with the scent of soap and furniture polish, and the white muslin curtains will be going up a month before their time."

EUSTACE ANNOYS ME.

He smiled.

"I am afraid I shall have to defer the pleasure of meeting these attractive properties till a few months later—till our wedding, eh, little girl? I suppose we *must* do the conventional thing and be married from your home, though village weddings are the dullest and most boring of functions. Popularly they are supposed to be simple and sweet and rustic, whereas they are really heavy and commonplace, attended by much feeding and drinking and dull toasts. But ours must be different. The reception must be under your shady oak trees, and you must wear some soft, illusive, filmy, dim draperies of white chiffon, and not that stiff horror—satin. With a dense background of green, and a brighter carpet of green grass at your feet, you ought to look very ch—"

"Grass doesn't grow under trees," I interrupted, "and I shall be probably married in puce-coloured alpaca; we are not modish in Heatherland. But I don't want to talk about my wedding-gown; it may nev—I mean June is a long way off, but what I do want to discuss is this question of going home. I know mother will be expecting you. She will be hurt and disappointed if you treat her in such indifferent fashion; and, besides, I think you ought to go."

"Don't be unreasonable, dear," and his voice drawled in the way I have learned to dread. "You must try not to be conventional, it is so narrowing.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

This asking a mother for her daughter's hand would, in our case, be simply an empty formality. You and I have agreed to marry each other. You are of age; there is nothing more to be said."

"But mother might object to you," I persisted; "and as for conventionality, the boot is on the other leg. It is *you* who are conventional."

"That is not a very cultured or refined expression," he said, smiling and showing his white teeth, "and it is a great surprise to me to know that anyone could dub *me* as a conventional being. May I ask in what way I have fallen into such a depressing error?"

And when I told him he became very annoyed.

"That is not conventionality," he retorted. "There is a correct way of eating and an incorrect. You would not eat asparagus with a knife and fork. So there is a correct way of getting out of a carriage and, as you know to your sorrow, an incorrect."

"Yes, but you did not care about my falling; you were only thinking that my awkwardness would make it clear to the world that I was unaccustomed to carriages," I said hotly.

He coloured slightly.

"You are very imaginative," he said.

"Well, deny it if you can. I would not have minded had you spoken gently and kindly. I am quite willing to be taught, but it wounds me when you speak so, Eustace."

EUSTACE ANNOYS ME.

"Well, you must try not to be such a touchy little thing. I think it is only kind to point out to you your little mistakes. You know they are your best friends who tell you of your faults."

"Then the Lord deliver me from such friends," I said devoutly; "I would prefer a host of enemies. I know those friends, and would gladly attend their funerals."

"You are very uncontrolled and excitable," he sighed, seating himself on the sofa. "Let me see, how old do you say you are?"

"I shall be twenty-two on the 18th of May," I said glibly.

"So much? I should not have thought it. Well, come and sit down here by me. I want you to try and realise, dearest, that when I speak so it is for your good."

"No, thanks; I am going. I don't want to realise it."

"But why go? I want you to stay with me. This time together before dinner has always been so pleasant, hasn't it?"

"I don't think I have enjoyed it very much," I said slowly as I opened the door.

His eyebrows took unto themselves such an expression of extreme surprise that I laughed in spite of myself.

"I am sorry to hear that," he said in a voice which implied he didn't believe me. "What are you going to do in your room that will be more entertaining?"

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

“Stitch a new braid on my skirt,” I said; “it is fascinating work, and gives me an opportunity to think. Much conversation is a weariness to the flesh when—another person does all the talking. Good-bye.”

Aunt Menelophe has been talking to me. When I heard her knock, and she came in—a beautiful, gracious presence, with her soft greys, and soft rustling of silken skirts, and the faint, clean, sweet smell of lavender, which always clings to her—I felt, suddenly, so overpoweringly in love with her that I was obliged to get up and put my arms round her and hold her tightly.

“How nicely you do smell, Aunt Menelophe,” I said, as I wheeled up an armchair to the fire and put her into it. “Somehow you always make me think of the hymn—

“Pleasant are Thy courts above,
Pleasant are Thy courts below.”

“Do I? It is lavender—home grown. But what are you doing up here alone?” she said, smiling.

“Sewing,” I told her.

“It seems an unusual and prosaic sort of thing for a newly-engaged girl to be doing when her *fiancé* is in the house,” she remarked.

“Girls must be tidy even if they are engaged,” I said evasively.

She laughed.

EUSTACE ANNOYS ME.

“What is the matter?” she asked.

“Aunt Menelophe, I have noticed that if ever I am quiet or desire to be alone, everybody instantly jumps to the conclusion that there is something the matter with me, or that I am sickening for some illness. It is so depressing. Should I not be gabbling away at home or tearing about with Dibbs, mother invariably asks me if I have a headache. Now it is a little trying, isn’t it, that I can never be quiet or enjoy a little communing with my own spirit?”

“Because it is not natural to you. Anyone can see that you are an intensely gregarious creature, given the right sort of people with whom to consort; besides, stitching on braids is dull, nasty work. Parkins would have done it for you.”

“I am enjoying it immensely,” I said untruthfully, “and have had a lovely think.”

“What have you been thinking about?” she inquired.

I hesitated.

“I have been thinking of the *descent* of man and the *ascent* of woman. I wonder how it has come about that women are so much superior to men—so much bigger and broader.”

Aunt Menelophe sat back in her chair and laughed.

“It is not a month since I heard you express exactly the opposite sentiments, and you say you are consistent.”

“A lot has happened in a month, Aunt

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

Menelophe," I said. "Besides, 'consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do.'"

"Oh!" said Aunt Menelophe.

"Yes," I said, "that is from Emerson. Eustace read it to me last night."

"Oh!" said Aunt Menelophe again.

"I must now dress for dinner," I observed, getting up and beginning to put away my work; "but you needn't go unless you like." But Aunt Menelophe was moving slowly towards the door, and she disappeared through it still repeating "Oh!" under her breath.

CHAPTER XXVII.

I RECEIVE SOME LETTERS OF CONGRATULATION,
AND EUSTACE AGAIN ANNOYS ME.

WHEN one is going to be late for breakfast at Blongton Hall, either you must skip your bath, or your prayers and Bible if you desire to get down before Butterby has consumed the whole of the eggs and bacon. Butterby is so tiresomely absent-minded at meals. Now this morning I chose the latter course. For one thing, the "Children's Scripture Union" authorities have willed that its members should read the book of *Numbers* for its daily portion, and *Numbers* is not interesting; and for another—well, since I began to read all those strange books of Eustace's my prayers have not seemed so convincing as of old. It seems impossible to believe that God—no, this First Cause—can be bothered listening to the requests of a foolish girl when He has so much to do and arrange in all these billions of worlds.

And yet I feel sorry, and somehow I feel lonely. It was always comforting to think that someone was understanding when I tried to be patient with Angela. Certainly I did not try half enough, but

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

now it seems that it won't matter at all, though Eustace says it will. He says we must do right for its own sake, and from love of humanity. If I am going to do right out of my love for Angela a precious lot I shall get done.

As I walked down the stairs to breakfast it came over me that it was the very first time in my life I had left my bedroom in a morning without saying my prayers. I had skipped them, it is true, shortened them, but I had never left them utterly unsaid. I stood irresolutely with my hand on the banisters, half inclined to turn back, when Eustace appeared. He asked me what was the matter, and why I was looking so troubled, and like a stupid I told him. My knowledge of him might have led me to realise that he could not understand how I felt after all these years of saying my prayers—to suddenly leave them unsaid; but it hurt me badly when he laughed. He stooped and kissed me when he saw my cheeks flame up, and put his arm round me, but I couldn't forget the laugh.

"Were your prayers such a comfort to you?" he asked, still smiling.

"No," I replied, "not often," and I tried to walk on.

"Well, why do you feel it so much, the not saying them?"

"Supposing," I said, "you had been in the habit of saying 'good-morning' to someone for nearly twenty years, and suddenly one day you found the

I RECEIVE SOME LETTERS

person had vanished, wouldn't you feel a little lonely? Especially if there were nothing left to take that person's place."

"But that is where you make a mistake," he retorted; "there is."

I shook my head.

"There may be for clever people such as you, who are strong and self-reliant and can stand alone, but where do I come in?"

"You must lean on me, little one," he replied, again putting his arm round me, "I will help you and teach you."

"But I don't want you," I cried, wriggling away; "I want my old faith. You—you can't take the place of God to me. Can't you see? You have taken everything away from me, and in its place you offer me yourself and some difficult doctrine of which I cannot make top nor tail. I wish you had never read me that old Evolution book."

"But the theory of evolution does not necessarily take away your Christ," he said, looking deeply offended.

"It does," I snapped. "It makes me feel as though I had been standing on my head."

"I think you want your breakfast," he replied, stalking in front of me with his head in the air, and perhaps he was right.

Four letters were lying on my plate, and I guessed their contents.

"Congratulations, I suppose?" said Aunt Mene-

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

lophe after a time. "What does your mother say? I hope she is surviving the shock."

"She appears resigned, and is engaged in purchasing calico and flannel for my trousseau, and Angela is copying out recipes. They wish to make me a good housewife," and I glanced at Eustace.

"What a horrible prospect," he said.

"Don't be alarmed," I replied, laughing; "house-keeping is not my *métier*."

"Which is a pity," remarked Aunt Menelophe severely. "Neither of you will be happy if what you say is correct. Eustace will be uncomfortable and hungry, and you will be annoyed at his daring to be hungry, and then he will go to his club."

"And I shall go to mine. I love meals, what I call, out of doors. I can't remember the occasion on which I have not dined from off our own large table at home. It will be such a pleasant change. But I must continue my letters; they are most interesting. Mother's accounts have gone wrong. She is one-and-sixpence out, and wants me to help her if I can."

"Chimney-sweep," said Butterby, so unexpectedly and suddenly, that I spilt my coffee. I sat and stared at him.

"Whatever made you think of that?" I asked.
"It was very clever of you."

"Not at all," he retorted, looking pleased. "I heard you read out to the mater in the last letter

I RECEIVE SOME LETTERS.

from your mother that your kitchen chimney required sweeping."

"Butterby," I said, "you are a genius; I always knew it. I will at once send mother a postcard to that effect. You are the kind of man who will make your mark in the world."

"Are you wanting that beetle back?" he asked somewhat unkindly.

I had once again lent it to him.

"No, I'm not, Butterby. How can you mis-judge me so?" I asked in hurt tones, and they all laughed.

When breakfast was over Eustace asked me to go to the library.

"There is a little book on monistic and genetic philosophy I want to read to you," he said. "I think it will help you to feel happier."

"Is it about monasteries?" I inquired.

He gave a little sigh.

"You have a lot to learn, but I shall enjoy teaching you. You are fairly quick, but we must lose no time."

"Couldn't we wait till after we are married?" I suggested, my heart sinking as I saw him reach two awful-looking books out of the shelves. "I want to read you these letters; they are so dear and funny. I shall have heaps of time by-and-by to learn all about this genesis philosophy."

"Genetic," he corrected me, sitting down and looking resigned. "Are they long?"

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"Don't you want to hear them?" I asked in nettled tones.

"Not very much; but what interests you must, of course, interest me. I must train myself to seeing things with your eyes."

My first impulse was to fling the letters at his head, but I thought better of it. We must not again begin the day with quarrelling; it seemed so *bourgeois*. Besides, were we not to be married in six months?

"They are not very long, and I think will amuse you," I said, trying to speak gently.

"Well, come nearer to me; I like to watch your face when you read," he said.

This was a great improvement. I liked him so infinitely better when he spoke thus than when he was talking about dull things like psychic gradations and the embryology of the soul.

I seated myself on the arm of his chair, and began with mother's letter:—

"SHADY OAK, HEATHERLAND,
"February 7th.

"MY DEAR HAZEL,

"The news of your engagement in your letter received this morning came to us as a very great surprise; in fact, it has so bewildered me that I cannot get my accounts to balance, though I have been at them for over two hours. I cannot trace what I must have omitted to enter, and there is a deficit of 1s. 6d. Angela has done her utmost to

I RECEIVE SOME LETTERS.

assist me, but I should be glad if you were at hand, for you have, in the past, been so remarkably successful in helping to elucidate matters. Perhaps you will remember the occasion on which I was 2s. 8d. short, and, after endless worry, was about to enter it into my petty cash book as 'sundries,' a thing I greatly dislike doing, when opportunely you came into the room and reminded me of 'fowl food.'

"But now, my dear child, I must speak to you on a more important subject. I offer you my warmest wishes for your future happiness. I cannot, at present, add congratulations until I have made Mr. Escourt's acquaintance, which I trust will be very soon.

"I am bound to say that I think it would have been more admirable on your *fiancé's* part had he gained my sanction before approaching you, but possibly he spoke to your Aunt Menelophe as regarding her in the light of your chaperon while you were under her roof.

"I must confess, too, that I am assailed with grave doubts when I reflect upon the brevity of your acquaintance with—I suppose I must say Eustace, though it seems somewhat familiar to speak so of a stranger. You say in a fortnight's time you have seen more of him and know him better than you would have done in an *ordinary* way in fourteen years. Am I to take it from this that you have met him in an *extraordinary* way? I do trust that you have been in no way bold or unmaidenly in your behaviour. (Your father used to say I was as elusive as a shadow; of course I was very small. I think it must

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

be more difficult for a tall girl to be elusive.) But I must put such a suspicion behind me. No daughter of mine would be immodest, of that I am convinced.

“And now that I have fulfilled my duty, as a mother, and read to you my little homily, I must turn to pleasanter matters.

“On receipt of your letter, I hastened to the boxroom to examine your grandmother's veil. It is in excellent preservation and of a lovely colour, old Limerick, and a large size. It should reach almost to the end of your train. There is also a Limerick lace flounce. I cannot help feeling that they will cause quite a sensation in Heatherland, and it pleases me to think that Mrs. Boyds will see them. She will then understand that we have come of some family.

“You say that Mr. Es—Eustace is desirous, with my approval, that your marriage should take place in June. The time is very short in which to prepare your trousseau; but we can engage Phœbe Ellis to come in and help with the plain sewing. Her tucking is superior even to Angela's, and she still strokes her gathers, which, in these days of machinery and slop-work, is a virtue not to be overlooked.

“It is satisfactory to know that Eustace is a man of means, for I do not think you would have made a very suitable wife for a poor man. Your darning is bad, and there is much to be desired in your cooking. However, perhaps you will now begin to improve and learn. Angela has already begun to write you out some of our best and tried recipes.

“I am looking forward to the day when you bring your *fiancé* to Shady Oak. Angela and I are paying

I RECEIVE SOME LETTERS.

a few calls this afternoon. Some weeks have elapsed since I saw Mrs. Moss. Should any item strike you which I might have omitted to enter into my account-book please send me word.

“With my love to your Aunt Menelophe and much to yourself,

“I remain,

“YOUR AFFECTIONATE MOTHER.”

“Isn’t she a dear?” I said. “She will be as sentimental over our wedding as a girl of sixteen. Mother is such a strange mixture of practicality and sentimentality. I am sure you will like her.”

“She seems a funny old lady,” he remarked.

“She is not old,” I contradicted; “she is only middle-aged, and wears such pretty caps, which, however, are usually on one side, rather detracting from the staid appearance they ought to give to her. Mother’s only fault lies in her preference for Angela to me; it seems so short-sighted of her.”

He smiled.

“And what is Angela like?”

I felt pleased at his interest, and when he wasn’t looking smuggled the two dry books to the back of the chair.

“Angela is unlike anything else God ever created,” I said impressively. “If you like I will read you her letter?”

He nodded assent, and I began to realise once

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

more what a really nice man he was, though his moods were as numberless as the sands of the sea.

“MY DEAR HAZEL,” I began, reading out loud,

“I write to offer you my congratulations on your engagement. Naturally we are astonished, and I must confess that I, for one, never anticipated your marrying.

“Mr. Escourt is, apparently, a man of no small courage; but you inform us that he has a good income, so that explains, a little, what would otherwise appear to us incomprehensible, for a man meeting a girl away from home on a visit cannot possibly judge of her capabilities as a housekeeper. However, mother and I must endeavour to do all we can towards overcoming your deficiencies in this respect during the next six months.

“I have, at some sacrifice to myself, decided to hand over to you the management of the house-keeping and cooking during that period, and I shall always be ready to assist and advise you. I am making out a list of the household work and regulations for each day of the week, which I trust you will implicitly follow. It has taken many years of experience and much anxious thought to arrive at that perfection in the arrangement of the multifarious duties of a household, such as ours, as to permit of Rose’s being dressed for the front-door bell by three o’clock. The least alteration, therefore, will upset the entire work of the house. Some house-keepers might be of the opinion that it was impossible

I RECEIVE SOME LETTERS.

to clean the stair-rods *every week*, but I maintain that it can be done, and is.

“I thought you would be glad of some good and economical recipes for your new home (cookery books are, as a rule, misleading and grossly extravagant, the writers of them appearing to be under the misapprehension that fowls lay all the year round), so I have purchased a 6d. exercise book with sensible stiff covers, and in my spare time, which as you are aware is limited, will copy out all our most valued and proved recipes, amongst them being ‘How to spice a round of beef,’ always a great favourite with men.

“Before closing I must ask you if your *fiancé* is addicted to smoking? For if this be the case the muslin curtains shall be put up in the dining-room before your arrival; they will not hold the fumes of tobacco to the same extent as would the heavy damask ones. You will remember that on one occasion after a visit from Mr. Inderwick, who smoked a peculiarly pungent cigar—or was it a black pipe?—we were under the necessity of taking them down and hanging them in the croft for two days, and even then the smell was exceedingly disagreeable.

“We shall expect Mr. Escourt immediately after his return from London, as naturally we wish to sanction your engagement, or otherwise, prior to its general publication. .

“As Reas are holding their annual sale this month, mother and I are going up to town to-morrow to purchase some calico and flannel for your under-

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

clothing. The calico shall be fine, as we are aware of your preference for nainsook, but the latter, in such a climate as ours, is ridiculous and simply invites rheumatism.

“With love, I remain,
“Your affectionate sister,
“ANGELA B. WYCHERLEY.”

“Now what do you think of that?” I said, chuckling. “That will be your sister-in-law.”

“She seems very middle-class,” he replied as he closed his eyes.

My cheeks flushed hotly.

“And that is what we are,” I answered. I don’t love Angela, but the contempt in his voice got all my pride up in arms. “We are middle-class—and so are you.”

He flushed in his turn.

“That was a little unnecessary,” he said; “I did not say *you* were middle-class. How touchy you are!”

At once I was sorry.

“I know I am touchy,” I laid my hand on his, “and you must help me to try to overcome it. I am horribly sensitive, Eustace—always have been, and you must be patient with me, and—and—love me. You do love me, don’t you?” I finished tremulously.

He looked at me in surprise.

“Haven’t I picked you out of all the women I know and asked you to be my wife?” he asked.

I RECEIVE SOME LETTERS.

"Yes—I suppose so, but that doesn't say you love me. I don't think somehow you seem quite satisfied with me. For instance, yesterday you didn't approve of my frock, and the day before you said I was opinionated and dogmatic, and to-day you say my family is middle-class and——"

"At the moment I think you are the silliest little girl in the world, and I'm surprised at you. You must understand that naturally I want my *fiancée* to be the best-dressed and nicest and most superior woman of my acquaintance. I want my friends to be envying me my luck and wishing *they* could marry Hazel Wycherley. Now finish your correspondence. I had no idea I was marrying into such an entertaining family."

He picked up the letters which had fallen to the ground and handed them to me.

Only feeling half satisfied and far removed from that joy and happiness which I had looked upon as my due as being one of the "engaged" ones of this world, I continued to read my correspondence. There had been no note of love in Eustace's voice as he had said, "I want my friends to be envying me my luck." I might have been a something bought with money of which he was speaking, and from which he meant to derive as much satisfaction as was possible. He had paid a high price for it; therefore it must amuse and interest him. He couldn't be expected to amuse and interest *it*; that was quite outside his calculations.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"This is from Sammy, our dear old gardener," I said with a sigh. "Sammy is very fond of me. Sometimes I take him out a glass of beer when he is mowing, though I don't think he loves me for that alone."

I looked at Eustace, but he was staring out of the window.

"SHADY OAK COTTAGE,
"February 7th, A.D.

"MY DEAR MISS HAZELT,

"The mistress tells me as how you are goin' to get married, so I herewith write to offer you my congratulashions, which may seem misunderstandable, as I never got married myself. But I says marriage is for wimin who seems to like it, but not for men who is better single. So I was right in my calculashons in the happen-room the day as you wanted to go to a hisland and sit on yaller sands and eat a shrub. I was correct in sayin' you wanted to mate. The symptims never decaves me. I says to myself when I saw you afterwards jumpin' about amongst them cabbages, 'Sammy, you mark my words Miss Hazelt will have catched a 'usband in six months' time,' and you have. You did dredful dammage to those cabbages. I had to boil three of 'em with the pig-food.

"I do hope as 'ow you'll be happy, Miss Hazelt. I shall miss you dredful, cos the Missis says you be goin' to live in London. I went to the 'Black Horse' this mornin' to order a load of minnure from Farmer Bowmphrey, who husually frequents that place about

I RECEIVE SOME LETTERS.

11 o'clock, and just quite casual-like I mentions as how I knew someone who was goin' to be married, and the company, which was quite select, guessed as how it was you and Mr. Hinderwick, and when I says no it was you and a grand gentleman from London, they was greatly surprised and said as how they didn't think you would have done so well for yourself. Those were their very words. And then Joey Tomlinson hups and says, 'We will drink their health,' and although it is against my customs of a mornin' I fell in with the suggestion, not to appear onfriendly-loike. So we drinks your 'ealth, Miss Hazelt, you and your young gentleman's.

"Hopin' this will find you as well as it leaves me at present,

"From your obedient servant,
"SAMUEL J. BROSTER."

"Who is Mr. Inderwick?" was Eustace's first question.

"A man who lives in Heatherland. I have often meant to tell you about him, but somehow I didn't," I said.

"Did he want to marry you?"

"He does," I corrected.

"And you refused him?"

"Obviously, as I am engaged to you."

"Well, now for your last letter. Heatherland seems to produce oddities of the first water."

Now I could have wished that Eustace would have shown greater interest and curiosity in Robert

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

Inderwick. His complete indifference piqued me. He just put him on one side as though he were something not worth considering. Was he so sure of himself, so certain of my affection? Suddenly, to my horror, I found myself saying, "Why, you self-satisfied, conceited ape, Robert's little finger is worth your whole beautiful body."

I sprang up. Supposing I had said it out loud: supposing Eustace could read my thoughts. I looked at him fearfully, anxiously; but he was standing in front of the mirror twisting his moustache into two, spiral points. For the moment he had forgotten my existence. I watched him curiously, thoughtfully. It seemed strange that he should attach greater importance to the training of his moustache than to the fact that there was in the world another man desirous of marrying me. Now if *he* had so much as mentioned another girl's name I should have been overwhelmed with curiosity and jealousy; I should have wanted to hear every single thing about her, and—he stood engrossed in his moustache. I walked over to the window and looked out on to the drive and the links beyond. To the left, nothing but a dreary expanse of chimneys and smoke met the eye; it was depressing and dull. My vision conjured up another scene—the Dee and blue Welsh mountains, and soft, snowy fields, and the figure of a big, stalwart man tramping along at my side in silent sympathy with my small troubles. The shabbiness and old tie and knotted bootlaces

I RECEIVE SOME LETTERS.

faded away; only the kindness and sympathy and—
and love were there, the rest had gone. Involuntarily
I turned and looked at Eustace's feet; absent-
mindedly I went nearer to him for a better
inspection. I looked up at him.

"Do you ever wear bootlaces with knots in
them?" I cried sharply.

"Certainly not," and he stared at me in such
utter amazement that I laughed feebly.

"Are you quite certain?" I repeated. "I—I
wish you did."

His mouth opened and shut again, just like a
fish's when it has been out of the water for some
time.

"Don't—don't look at me like that, or I shall
scream," I whispered.

"Hazel, have you gone out of your mind?" he
asked.

I nodded.

"I think I have. I don't know which I want to
do most, laugh or cry. I think I must be hysterical
—I feel all funny and trembling, and my throat is
very tight. No, don't touch me; I shall be better
soon. It—it must be the excitement of my engage-
ment. I lead such a quiet life in the ordinary
way; and these letters they are too funny, too
screamingly funny, in the face of what is coming.
But I think I must go away now; I want to be
alone. I am sorry you—you don't wear old boot-
laces," and I fled from the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

I BREAK OFF MY ENGAGEMENT.

PICKING up a wrap of Aunt Menelophe's which lay on the hall table, I rushed into the garden and made for the shrubbery at the side of the house, and there I walked up and down, up and down between the rhododendron and laurel bushes till I became calmer.

It had been raining, but now the sun was out, and the bay leaves and box edging and damp earth sent forth a delicious, fresh, wet scent. Raindrops glistened on the ivy which clambered over a low, tumble-down wall, and a robin perched on a laurus-tinus bush seemed in excessively good spirits.

Everything but myself seemed happy and cheerful. Only *I* appeared to possess lobes in my brain stretched to bursting point.

I sat down on the wall and, clasping my hands round my knees, settled myself for a good think. I would endeavour to sort up, arrange, classify and marshal my various emotions to their proper places. It was unsatisfactory, and neither fair to Eustace nor myself to continue our engagement when I, for one, was in a constant state of volcanic upheaval. I would

I BREAK OFF MY ENGAGEMENT.

look the matter fairly and squarely in the face. Had I made a mistake? Was I unduly sensitive? Or was Eustace impossible to me as either lover or husband?

Eustace himself answered my last question. He sauntered down the path with his lithe, graceful swing, his hands in his pockets, and his eyes fixed on the bits of blue sky showing through the branches of the trees. I knew, though he did not appear to see me, that he was aware of my presence; he was evidently looking for me, a damp shrubbery was not the sort of place Eustace would haunt. I also knew the exact moment when he would give a start of surprise at seeing me, it would be when he arrived at the laurustinus bush. My conjecture was correct, and his surprise was natural and well expressed.

“ Hallo! *you* here. What are you doing? ”

“ Sitting on a wall and soliloquising,” I answered.

“ I expected you to say you were thinking of me.”

“ I was.”

“ But the expression of your face was not very happy.”

I did not reply.

He seated himself on the wall beside me.

“ I have been searching for you for some time. I wish you would not dash off in that way, dear, it is so disconcerting. There, I had prepared for a morning’s work and study with you. I had, at some trouble, drawn up a short treatise which I hoped might be of some help to you in your various

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

religious difficulties ; and first you take up a good deal of valuable time in reading those—unique specimens of composition, and then, without a word of warning, you are seized with a morbid desire that I should wear old boot laces, go into mild hysterics, and hide yourself in this damp, unwholesome swamp. It is a little inconsiderate of you, and I desire some explanation of your conduct."

To my surprise, instead of feeling violently angry at the tone he adopted, I was seized with an overwhelming desire to laugh. He did sound so ridiculously hurt and offended.

My answer was quite irrelevant.

"Eustace, do you know you are so different to what I thought you were."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, isn't it a pity? I thought your inside matched your outside, and I find it doesn't. It is so disappointing." He turned and looked at me, and his brows drew together. "You will wonder what I mean, and I am going to try and tell you if you don't mind staying here with me for a little. But are you sure you are warm enough? I am so accustomed to being out of doors, and I always like to discuss things that matter out of doors." He made no reply, and my heart gave a little twitter, but I grabbed at my courage and went on. "Yes, you are so very different to what I imagined."

"I am not responsible for your imagination," he remarked coldly.

I BREAK OFF MY ENGAGEMENT.

"No, of course not. I quite agree with you in that. It is I who am to blame, therefore I am all the more wretched. I should not have idealised you. It is not your fault."

He made a movement of impatience.

"You speak in riddles. I think you are meaning to be rude, but your language is vague. I don't quite follow you."

"I will try and make myself clearer, but it is difficult to say——"

I picked a piece of ivy, and slowly dissected it.

Suddenly he put his arm round me.

"What is it? What is the matter, Hazel?"

He spoke more gently.

I pushed him away.

"Don't do that," I cried. "Don't be kind to me now, it will only make it more difficult what I am going to say to you. Eustace, I want you to release me from my engagement."

He started violently, and I nearly fell off the wall.

"Impossible! You don't know what you are saying."

"Yes I do. I am not happy."

"Not happy?" he repeated in surprise.

"No. It may seem incredible to you, but I am really wretched. I cannot marry you. I am sorry."

He stared in front of him and frowned heavily.

"If this is a joke of yours it doesn't amuse me—it doesn't appeal to me."

"I am not joking. I am in deadly earnest."

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"But you cannot mean what you say. It's ridiculous! We've only been engaged a little over a week."

"And that has been a week too long. I blame myself very much. I was carried away. You dangled an alluring bait before my eyes and I jumped at it. Now I have begun to realise that to have it I must have you, and, on closer acquaintance, I find I don't want you. Forgive me, but I could not live with you, and we should both be unhappy."

"It is a pity you did not find this out sooner," he said frigidly.

"A thousand pities," and my voice trembled.

"But your letters of congratulation. Your friends in Heatherland. Think of the way people will talk."

"I am thinking."

"And you can face it?"

"I don't like the prospect, but it is preferable to a life of unhappiness."

"You don't mince matters."

"This is not the moment for politenesses. Besides, have you ever spared my feelings?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean?" I replied slowly. "Have you ever ceased correcting and instructing me since the moment I said I would be your wife? Have you ever ceased making me miserably conscious of my deficiencies?"

He raised his eyebrows.

I BREAK OFF MY ENGAGEMENT.

“ You are not fair. That is just like a woman. You expressed a desire to learn. You are—how shall I put it?—somewhat old-fashioned and provincial in your views. I thought you would feel out of it in my set in London. As my wife you will mix with all sorts and conditions of men and women—people of rare culture, and I wanted to fit you for the position you will take among them. I wanted to help you. Your simplicity of thought, your freshness, attracted me, they are very charming; but, after all, too many gaucheries of speech and thought become irritating in time and cease to amuse. I desired to spare you this, I wanted to teach you, and I thought you were interested. It seems I was mistaken.”

“ No, you were not mistaken,” I replied, “ I *was* interested, intensely interested, up to the moment when I discovered——”

“ What? ”

“ That you did not teach me out of love of me or love of your subject—of theology, books, art, pictures—but because you feared the opinion of your world. Your friends might laugh at your wife, at her old-fashionedness, at her—provincialism. She might be guilty of out-of-date religious sentiments and be held up to ridicule. She might go to church in a—middle-class sort of way in her best frock and hat. Monism, or whatever you call it, might be engrossing the attention of your seekers after truth; she has never never heard of the ism, she only possesses an old-fashioned deity called God. Browning might be

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

under discussion; she is ignorant of his works. Music is throwing the whole company into soulful ecstacies; she has no soul for music, and shocks the assemblage by expressing her yearnings for *The Garden of Sleep* in preference to some dislocating thunder of Wagner's. Art may be causing them to prance round the room and roll eyes heavenwards; she doesn't understand pictures, and abominates the Dutch School and large-faced, heavy-eyed Madonnas. And she keeps you on tenterhooks, wondering what she will say and do next; so you teach and talk to her a little more, instruct her a little more, read her drier books, and drag her to picture galleries and concert halls, when she is longing to enjoy these things in her own way, not as a means to education crammed down her unwilling throat, but as a new and delightful country —unexplored, and running over with precious gifts. She must be clever and showy and epigrammatic so that she may shine in your—set, when she wants to dally and play and be loved."

Eustace rose and confronted me.

"Do you know you are talking like an Adelphi melodrama?"

"I never saw one, Eustace, but if the drama feels as unhappy as I, it is in a bad way," I said.

"And you are extremely illogical; it is not ten days since you were wishing to go to theatres and concerts and picture galleries."

"And I still wish, but to be amused. Just to go with you and laugh and enjoy ourselves. Not to be

I BREAK OFF MY ENGAGEMENT.

instructed for the sake of what other people may think of me."

"Is it a sin to wish you to shine before my friends?"

"Yes, if it is to be achieved at the expense of my feelings. You have hurt me over and over again this week. When have you ever considered my feelings or wishes before your own?" and my voice suddenly blazed into anger. "We have read, *you* have talked, we have walked, we have driven just as you so willed. You have corrected me half a dozen times a day, kindly and gently I admit, but the correction has stung. I was led to believe that the engagement days of a girl were the most radiant of her life, and—I have cried myself to sleep each night. The other evening, for instance, when I said I was sorry for being cross and that it made me miserable to disagree with you, all you did was to quote some line of poetry, which did not seem to my dense understanding to bear upon the subject, when I was aching for you to take me in your arms and love me; and I had found it so hard to say those words, to say I was sorry. A girl likes a little fussing over—I am told it is the only time she ever gets it; *she* has to do the fussing afterwards—she likes a little courting, she so enjoys being queen for the moment, whereas I have had to dance to your piping. I don't mind doing my share of it, but I won't do it all; and yet I was prepared to do so much for you had you gone the right way with me. I can be led but not driven. That is where Angela

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

has always made a mistake, she has bullied me. At first, when you asked me to marry you, I thought it was only your wealth and all that it could give me that were attracting me; but later, I found it wasn't that, it was you—yourself. How you talked in the library that night! Were you only acting a part, I wonder, and has this been your real self of the last few days? I think from the very beginning I realised I did not *love* you, but you attracted, fascinated me. And I was flattered that you should pick me out of all the women you knew, and I was determined to be interested in the subjects in which you were interested. Ours should be a soul union. You should always find in me a sympathetic companion. I was prepared even to tackle *The Origin of Species*, though I had to read each page over five times before I had grasped its meaning. So—so it came as a shock to me to find that you did not want me so much as a companion, a wife, but as a pupil to train and mould, as a something of which to be proud to your friends. It came as a shock to me to find that you did not care two brass farthings for me."

"Why then should I wish to marry you?"

"I don't know," I replied, "it puzzles me. It may be that you were flattered by my admiration of you. Aunt Menelophe says I can't hide anything, and that my feelings, instead of being in their proper quarters and under control, are all over the place. You may have thought me—malleable. You may have felt as

I BREAK OFF MY ENGAGEMENT.

a potter does towards a bit of soft clay—that you would like to mould me, lick me into shape. But you began your moulding a little too roughly. But whatever your motives, and I cannot follow the workings of your mind, of this I am convinced—you don't love me, and I don't love you."

He made a movement of impatience.

"How you harp on love. Love is an old-fashioned sentiment."

"It is not too old-fashioned for me," I said steadily.

"But I am sure when we have settled down, when you are older and less emotional, we shall be very happy together. It is wonderful the adaptability of women, and you always—interest me."

I looked at him carefully from the top of his well-brushed head to the toe of his well-polished boot. And this was all he had to say to my outburst.

"Thank you," I said, "interest is not enough."

He sat down again and took my hand.

"Hazel, dear, I believe I love you as much as—I could love anyone."

"I feel honoured, Eustace, but strange to say that does not satisfy me. I want something more. You are the type of man who will always love yourself best."

"Don't all men?" and he asked the question as though he believed it.

"No," I said, "my father didn't for one, and—I know of another."

"You mean Mr. Inderwick, I suppose—the man

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

your gardener said was the cause of your jumping about among the cabbages?"

His voice was ironic.

I struggled against my anger, but my cheeks flamed.

"Yes," I said quietly, "I mean Mr. Inderwick. You and he are the exact opposites to one another. His exterior is rough, but he has the mind and heart of a gentleman. Your appearance," and I again looked him up and down, "is that of a gentleman, but—"

"Finish it," he said, going white.

"No, I think I won't," I said more gently, "I might be sorry afterwards, and, after all, I must not forget that once I said I would be your wife. That once seems so long ago, and yet it is only a little more than a week. And now I must say good-bye; we shan't meet again. Either you or I must leave here. I—am sorry I made such a mistake. More sorry than I can tell you. You probably can't forgive me now, but some day you will thank me."

"You have placed me in a ridiculous position," he said savagely. "You whom I fondly imagined were a little, simple country girl. All women are deceitful. You have made me a laughing-stock in the eyes of the world."

"Your philosophy will help you to bear it," I answered wearily, "and you can tell your friends that *you* broke off the engagement, and not *I*. You can tell them you found me too *gauche* and uneducated.

I BREAK OFF MY ENGAGEMENT.

I shan't mind, and it is true. Good-bye, Eustace, and try and forgive me."

I wonder now how my trembling legs supported me down that long shrubbery, for I was as an old lady; but somehow I got into the house and up to my room and on to my bed. The tears seemed to be stopped up, but my heart and head and body were one gigantic ache.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AUNT MENELOPHE SCOLDS AND AFTERWARDS COMFORTS ME.

I MUST have lain on the bed, with my face buried in the pillows, for a couple of hours before Aunt Menelophe came to me. I heard the dog-cart drive round to the front, I heard Eustace's voice saying "Good-bye," and then came the tap at the door.

"Oh, Aunt Menelophe," I cried, "I have been such a little fool!"

"Yes, dear," she said soothingly, stroking my hair.

"You think so?" I questioned, sitting up in bed.

"Certainly, dear."

I lay down and groaned.

"But you are doing better now," she said more encouragingly. "Your senses are coming back."

"You think I have done the right thing?"

"Undoubtedly. I am only surprised, knowing you, you did not do it sooner."

"I have been too utterly wretched," I moaned. "I have nearly—cut my throat, Aunt Menelophe."

"You mean poison, surely," she laughed, "it is more romantic, and the other is so—so unclean."

AUNT MENELOPHE COMFORTS ME.

"Don't," I wailed, "don't laugh at me, Aunt Menelophe. It is no joking matter."

"No," she said, "now you mention it, I don't think it is. I am trying to imagine the faces of your mother and Angela and all Heatherland, and I am wondering if the calico and flannel have yet been purchased. What will they all say?"

"What will they say?" I cried, rumpling up my hair. "What will they say? That is the question I have been asking myself for the last two solid hours. I daren't go home."

"Of course you daren't," said Aunt Menelophe decidedly, "you must stay with me."

"But I can't always live here."

"You can if you like."

I shook my head.

"I love you wildly, Aunt Menelophe, but—I couldn't leave mother."

"No, perhaps not," she agreed, "and—there may be someone else you would like to see sometimes."

My cheeks became hot.

"You mean Sammy. Yes, I should miss dear old Sammy."

"No, I don't mean Sammy," she contradicted.

"Aunt Menelophe," I observed, "I think it would show greater delicacy of feeling if we—did not discuss any other man when poor Eustace is barely—"

I paused.

"Cold in his grave? You surely don't mean that?" she asked.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

“When poor Eustace’s tobacco is still lingering about the house,” I finished, ignoring her interruption.

“That is Wellesley’s tobacco,” she said placidly.
“I know the peculiar scent.”

“How did he look?” I asked presently.

“A little pale,” she answered.

“That was rather nice of him,” I said, smoothing my pillow.

“But he made an excellent lunch. He had two helpings of roast beef and one of cabinet pudding,” she added, a little unnecessarily.

“Of course he had a long journey before him,” I remarked.

“Of course!” she agreed.

“That reminds me *I* have had no lunch,” I said, jumping up suddenly.

“Are you hungry?” There was a surprise in her accents which annoyed me.

“Not very,” I replied, lying down again, “only a little sinking.”

“That is not surprising after what you have gone through. Strong emotion always produces a sinking. A cup of tea by-and-by will refresh you.”

Now the thought of roast beef was infinitely more attractive to me than tea, but I could not say so.

“Do the servants and Wellesley know?” I asked, turning over on my face not to feel the emptiness.

“Servants know *everything*, and Wellesley is not an idiot. Parkins and James are at the moment

AUNT MENELOPHE COMFORTS ME.

discussing you in the pantry. I overheard them as I came up the stairs. Of course you *have* behaved badly—heartlessly, in fact."

"Oh, Aunt Menelophe, you are cruel," I moaned. "You are *very* unsympathetic, and I am so miserable."

Then, to my own surprise, I burst into tears. At once her arms were round me.

"Poor little Hazel!"—and she drew my head on to her shoulder—"have I teased you too much, hurt you? But I wanted to punish you a little—well, because I think you have behaved very foolishly, rashly. I am going to preach to you a little. From the very beginning you knew you did not love this man. Did you, now?"

I shook my head.

"You were attracted by his wealth, his appearance, the life he offered you; but there was no love in your heart. This, you thought, did not matter, so long as he loved you."

I nodded again.

"Well, this was not exactly an ideal feeling for a young girl. Girls are not nice when they are mercenary and ambitious. We want our girls to be simple and sweet and tender-hearted and loving, and not—calculating." I shrank a little, and she stroked my cheek gently. "I was disappointed in you, grievously so. I had expected something finer of John Wycherley's daughter, for he, in every sense, could answer to the grand old name of

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

gentleman——” She stopped and mused a little. “ He was the finest man I ever met, and the best. So—I was disappointed in you, angry with Eustace, and still more angry with myself for allowing things to come to such a pass. One thing, however, comforted me—I knew the engagement would not last. That was why I insisted upon your writing to your mother. I realised that it might precipitate matters. As soon as the gravity of the step you had taken was driven home to you I felt all would be well.”

“ How could you tell ? ”

“ You have a certain amount of sense. You belong to that type of woman who will always love with her heart and not with her head, which is the best type ; and, of course, you discovered Eustace did not love you.”

I started.

“ Not a little bit ? ”

“ Not a bit of it,” she said emphatically. “ Eustace Escourt is selfish to the backbone. He thinks far more of the set of his tie than the feelings of a woman.”

I lay and pondered this over.

“ I found out he did not love me very much,” I said presently, “ not as—as men do love women. But why—why did he ask me to marry him ? ”

“ You must ask me something much easier,” said Aunt Menelophe ; “ I am unequal to coping with the mental processes of such a man. And now come and have some lunch ; it is being kept hot for you. You look quite pinched and worn.”

AUNT MENELOPHE COMFORTS ME.

I rose with alacrity.

"Are you still disappointed with me, Aunt Mene-
lophé?" I asked, picking at one of the buttons on
her sleeve. "I should be—sorry if you were."

"I think you are the pluckiest little girl I have
known, and I am sure your father is smiling down
approval on you. It is not an easy thing to break
with a man like Eustace," was her comforting and
cheering reply.

She sat and watched me while I ate my lunch.

"What did Eustace say to you?" I inquired,
balancing a roast potato at the end of my fork.

"He said that you had found out that you were
not suited to one another; that you felt unequal
to the position of being his wife; that you preferred
Mr. Inderwick; and that perhaps, after all, it was
better for you to marry a provincial."

"Oh!" I gasped.

"Did you say you preferred Mr. Inderwick?"

"Certainly not."

She reflected for a little.

"It is incomprehensible to me Wellesley's liking
for that man," she said; "he seems fascinated by
him."

"Perhaps he is nicer to men than to girls," I
suggested.

"Perhaps he is," she agreed. "He would hardly
dare to instruct them to the extent he does women.
And, of course, he has helped Wellesley a good deal
in his career; he knows a good many people who are

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

by way of being literary. They are not very big, or they would not pose; but they are helpful."

"Aunt Menelophe," I said, "I am sick of the very words literary and culture. Are all literary people horrid?"

"Not all," she replied, laughing. "Wellesley isn't."

"And do they always talk about things in the abstract, and nothing real?"

"Oh, no! They chiefly talk about themselves, and they are anything but abstract, which is the pity of it," she replied gravely, picking a dead leaf from the plant in the centre of the table and throwing it into the fire.

"I don't think I should care to marry a literary man," I observed.

"No; they are unpunctual at meals, and when they do arrive they eat more than their share."

"Does Wellesley?" I asked.

"I exclude Wellesley in everything," she said; "he is quite an exception, as you must see."

CHAPTER XXX.

I FIND HAPPINESS.

IT was last evening that Robert came. I was in the library curled up on the white bearskin rug before the fire, in the gloaming. The fire was clear and red, and in its glowing depths I could see many castles, and in each castle there were always two figures—a man's and a girl's. In one, they were having breakfast together in an old-fashioned oak-panelled room, and she was talking in her “usual illogical way.” In another, she was dusting—not Parian jugs and bronze horses—but a large bowl (which the man called an ash tray), and arranging, in little piles on the mantel-shelf, a gross of matches which the man watched with a jealous eye for fear that perchance she might remove one. In a third, they were in the summer sunshine wading along the brown sands and through the little pools below Dawpool in search of cockles and mussels. In a fourth, they were sitting in a big arm—in two big armchairs before a cosy fire, and she was reading aloud to him—did I begin to write *The Origin of Species*? For it was certainly not that dry stuff, but a beautiful human book, moving them to laughter and tears—*The Mill*

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

on the Floss. They were all homely pictures, but the people in them were very happy, and the man was big and strong and good. . . . A scalding tear dropped on to the bearskin, and the fire became a blur, and it was then I heard his step in the hall (I should know it anywhere), and the door open. . . . I don't know how I came to be gathered up in his strong arms as I half rose to meet him. I know I did not give him permission to behave in such intimate fashion. Perhaps my "Oh, Robert!" was a little too glad, I will admit that; he says it was the two big tears shining in the firelight that did it, and that his arms involuntarily left his side. But whatever the cause, I was very content to be there. We sat so for some time in silence. He did not kiss me, but drew my face against his and held me closely, and—I was happy.

"Can it be true, little Hazel?" he said at length. I nodded.

"Yes, if you will have me," I whispered.

"Have you? It looks like it, don't you think?" he asked.

"It does rather," I said, and he laughed.

"How did you guess? Why did you come?" I whispered again.

"Mrs. Menzies wired for me this afternoon."

"Aunt Menelophe wired for you!" I shouted, starting up.

"Now don't get excited," he commanded in his old direct way, and pulling me back. "Mrs.

I FIND HAPPINESS.

Menzies and I have been in correspondence for some time."

"No!" I gasped.

"Yes," he said calmly.

I closed my eyes.

"Tell me all about it," I murmured faintly. "Aunt Menelophe is a base traitor."

"Aunt Menelophe is the finest and noblest of women on God's earth. She is an absolute brick," he observed with conviction.

"Oh!" I said.

"Yes; the very day after you arrived here, in answer to a letter I had ventured to write her, she wrote to me and said——"

My eyelids were glued together.

"I can bear it," I said in a strangled voice. "Go on. But Aunt Menelophe and I are enemies for life."

"Mrs. Menzies will visit us twice a year regularly, and we will wait upon her hand-and-foot," he said with determination.

"Go on," I repeated; "to talk is the easiest thing in the world."

"In this letter she said, 'Don't give up hope; Hazel is a little wobbly.'"

"She didn't!" I shouted, again starting up.

"Do sit still," he said plaintively. "I can't get on with my story if you jump about so; in fact, I don't think I will tell you any more. I want to talk about many things."

"I promise I won't move again if you will tell

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

me everything, every word of this shameful story. If you suppress one single item I shall—break off our engagement."

He laughed and told me all, and I sat in silence for a long time considering Aunt Menelophe's duplicity.

"Well, little girl?" he said softly after a time, stroking my hair.

"I say again it is the most shameful story I have ever heard. I could not have believed it of Aunt Menelophe; I trusted in her implicitly. To think that while I have been confiding in her, relying upon her honour, comforted by her sweet sympathy, she has all the time been drawing me out, making me say things and passing them on to you. Oh, it is horrible, horrible!"

"Not quite that; you exaggerate it. She has never once repeated anything you actually said. She has in all written me four letters——"

"And in the last," I interrupted, "she actually said she thought I was beginning to want you."

"Those were her words."

"Followed by a telegram to-day saying that I had put such a wish into words?"

He nodded. I made a big effort to wrench myself away. I felt suffocated.

"That is not fair," he said sternly, gripping me tightly. "You promised you would sit still."

"But this is awful, Robert," I cried, struggling; "human flesh cannot stand it."

I FIND HAPPINESS.

“Well, then, sit still; it’s quite easy if you try.”

“But I have been actually flung at your head.”

“I’ve liked it,” he answered, smiling.

“What must you think of me?” I asked, covered with shame.

“Shall I tell you?”

“Please,” I said under my breath.

And he told me, but—I can’t write it down, it is too foolish and—beautiful; and then he drew my face to his and kissed me.

“That is not me,” I said, shaking my head.

“Your grammar is somewhat shaky, but it is you all the same,” he said, smiling, “my own dearest little girl.”

“Robert, you *are* big and kind and magnanimous,” I sighed. “Men *are* nice and superior.”

“All of them?” he asked.

“Not quite all,” I corrected myself. “Did Aunt Menelophe tell you I had been engaged?”

“Yes.” His voice was grave.

“And yet you still care for me?”

“And yet I still care for you,” he said, his face becoming very tender, “and am glad about it now.”

“You are glad?”

“Yes, for I think it taught you to love me, or rather to realise that you loved me, for I believe that you have cared for me a little all along without knowing it.”

I nodded.

“I believe I have.”

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

And then one of those silences, which are more beautiful and completely satisfying than words, fell between us. I gazed at my castles, and Robert gazed at me.

“By the way,” he said after a time, “have you noticed my new suit and boots and tie?”

“Yes,” I replied.

He regarded himself gravely.

“Do you think they fit?” he inquired anxiously.

“Perfectly. I hardly knew you,” I said, trying to suppress a choke in my voice. But his quick ear detected it.

“Why, my little Hazel,” he cried, “what is the matter? I believe you are crying. What have I said?”

“Nothing, nothing,” I whispered, burying my face in his shoulder; “but please do not ever mention those—clothes again. I am too ashamed. It was so mean and petty and horrid of me. Promise me you will forget it, I want you to so much, and to forgive me. You don’t know how I have ached to see you in the old, wrinkly, shabby coat and moulted tie and knotted bootlaces. I have pined for the sight of a knotted bootlace.”

“My poor, little girl,” he said tenderly, hugging me to him closely, “my silly, little girl. I didn’t mind; you were quite right, I was too careless of my appearance. I should be dissatisfied if you were not fresh and pretty and dainty. I shall never forget how you looked that day in church.”

“You have told me before,” I interrupted; “it

I FIND HAPPINESS.

was the day you were so—snubby and unkind to me; but haven't you anything ancient now—not a single primeval garment?"

A twinkle crept into his eyes.

"Well, to tell you the truth," he confessed, "I *did* keep the old, wrinkly coat just to smoke in. It is so confoundedly comfortable. I gave instructions for it to be thrown away, and afterwards I fished it out of a heap of rubbish stowed away in the boxroom. I don't know what led me up there, it must have been instinct in conjunction with a tightness across my chest, caused, I suppose, by my new coat. So I sneaked it away one night under cover of the darkness, and hid it before Mrs. Egerton found me out, and if you don't mind I will wear it occasionally in an evening just to smoke in." His face was whimsical and pleading.

"You shall wear it every night as long as it hangs together," I vowed; "and then we will have it patched. And if ever you miss putting it on I shall —refuse to sit with you."

"I'll never miss," he said with promptitude; and then we heard Aunt Menelophe's step, and she paused outside the door while she hummed a little tune, which was quite unnecessary, as Robert and I were sitting on opposite sides of the hearth as she entered.

Her attitude was one of airy unconcern, almost, I was going to say, of brazenness. She advanced towards the coalbox, still humming.

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

"I came to see how the fire was getting on," she said, picking up the tongs, "some people have a way of letting it out."

"Aunt Menelophe, you are a base traitor," I observed, seizing her hand and kissing it. "Your and my ways in life will now lie apart."

"Well, then, you must leave my house at once," she replied, a little smile hovering round the corners of her sweet mouth, "but — Mr. Inderwick may stay."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE EVE OF MY WEDDING-DAY.

ROBERT and I are to be married to-morrow, the 21st of June, and I am so happy I can hardly bear it. Every now and again I have to screw up my eyes and pinch myself to make sure it is all true. I wander from one room to another, and I don't know them, for there are roses everywhere: pink—of that heavenly tint only to be found inside tiny sea-shells and in the faint flush of dawn on early summer mornings, and—in roses; yellow—pale on the outside, and with hearts of a deeper glow; crimson—great big luscious fellows, velvety and dewy; white—dear little sweet-scented monthly roses, very wide open and wide awake; and even little starry wild roses peeping out from their lovely foliage of green at their bigger and more important brethren. I give myself another little pinch. Can these be our rooms—our dining and drawing-rooms? Hitherto Angela has not permitted roses to enter them, for roses drop petals, and petals are untidy; but Robert asked for them (at my request), and Angela is wonderfully submissive to Robert, though she says things behind his back at times. Then,

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

too, the twelve, faded, damask chairs have new, sprightly, chintz covers, strewn with dainty, wee roses. I bought and paid for the chintz out of my trousseau money. It meant doing without another new hat and a second-best parasol; but one could not possibly require two new hats and two parasols, all at once, in Heatherland; it would be a wilful extravagance. Besides, I never use a parasol; I only carry one to church on Sundays to impress people.

Mother is radiant over the new covers. Phœbe Ellis made them; and I know mother goes half a dozen times a day to peep at them, and there is a beautiful look of satisfaction on her dear face every time she enters the room. I catch her surreptitiously closing the laths of the blinds. A stray sunbeam has been caught dancing over the chair near to the whatnot; it must be banished at once. It seems funny to think that soon I shall have the blinds up all day at the Old Hall Farm, sun or no sun; the Dee and the banks of yellow sand and the blue Welsh mountains will never be shut out from our view. I shall look across at the shrouded windows of Shady Oak, and give a gentle, little chuckle of satisfaction.

From the roses in the house Dibbs and I wander to the garden and Sammy, and I find roses there, roses everywhere. He and I keep having last little gossips, he assuring me that "wimin" (barring myself) are "dry hash." He forgets that I shall be

THE EVE OF MY WEDDING-DAY.

living quite close to him, and that there will be frequent opportunities in the future for impressing this depressing and mournful fact upon me. This morning I said—

“Sammy, you are really jealous that you yourself are not being married. It seems sad that no young woman would ever have you.”

I thought it wise to slip away the next moment to my room to have another peep at my wedding-gown. I take a chair to it and sit down and gaze. It is Aunt Menelophe's wedding gift. Reas, of Basnett Street, call it chiffon, but it is nothing of the kind; it is a bewildering mass of filmy, frothy, billowing sea-foam. When I am not peeping at it I know Rose and Elizabeth are, so it is never alone. I try to imagine what use it will be to me in the future. It will not harmonise with Robert's smoking-coat. He says we shall go to London once a year, and I can then wear it; and Angela suggests my selling it. The romantic side of my sister has never been strongly developed.

The written recipe book is voluminous and fat. I notice the page given over to pickled onions is heavily scored, especially the parts referring to the weight of peppercorns. Mrs. Egerton will wonder at it, as she is to remain on with us, for a time, and housekeep. Robert says he wants us to have the long days of summer and autumn to ourselves—quite to ourselves—and that their harmony would be completely spoiled were I to be worried with

THE VACILLATIONS OF HAZEL.

things like butchers and the paraffin oil giving out. Robert takes such a sensible view of life, and does not think it essential that a woman should know exactly how many times a week her saucepans are scoured out with boiling soda water. Mother and Angela shake their heads over the retention of Mrs. Egerton. They say it is gross extravagance, and will get me into bad ways. Mother has made me promise to keep accounts, and has presented me with a black American-cloth covered book containing ruled lines of three columns, a green purse, and two, tin cash-boxes. She says the boxes won't be sufficient for properly kept accounts, but that Robert's empty Navy-cut tobacco tins will fill up the breach. Now I reflect upon it, I have frequently observed mother regarding tobacco boxes with a sort of introspective eye.

Frederick Moss is engaged to Rosabel Hawthorn, and is very pleased and proud at having found someone who will marry him. She is very happy, and says being engaged to a poet gives her funny feelings. I am not surprised. Frederick has, as a wedding present, given me a copy of his own poems bound in white leather. The paper is thick and the margin of the leaves is broad, and the book does not seem to contain much else of importance.

Butterby has given me the beetle for a wedding present. He forgot to return it to me after borrowing it for the fourth time. It came in a registered parcel, with a few lines mentioning its

THE EVE OF MY WEDDING-DAY.

value, and the care I should take of it. He and Aunt Menelophe arrive this evening. Dear Aunt Menelophe, a lump rises in my throat whenever I think of her.

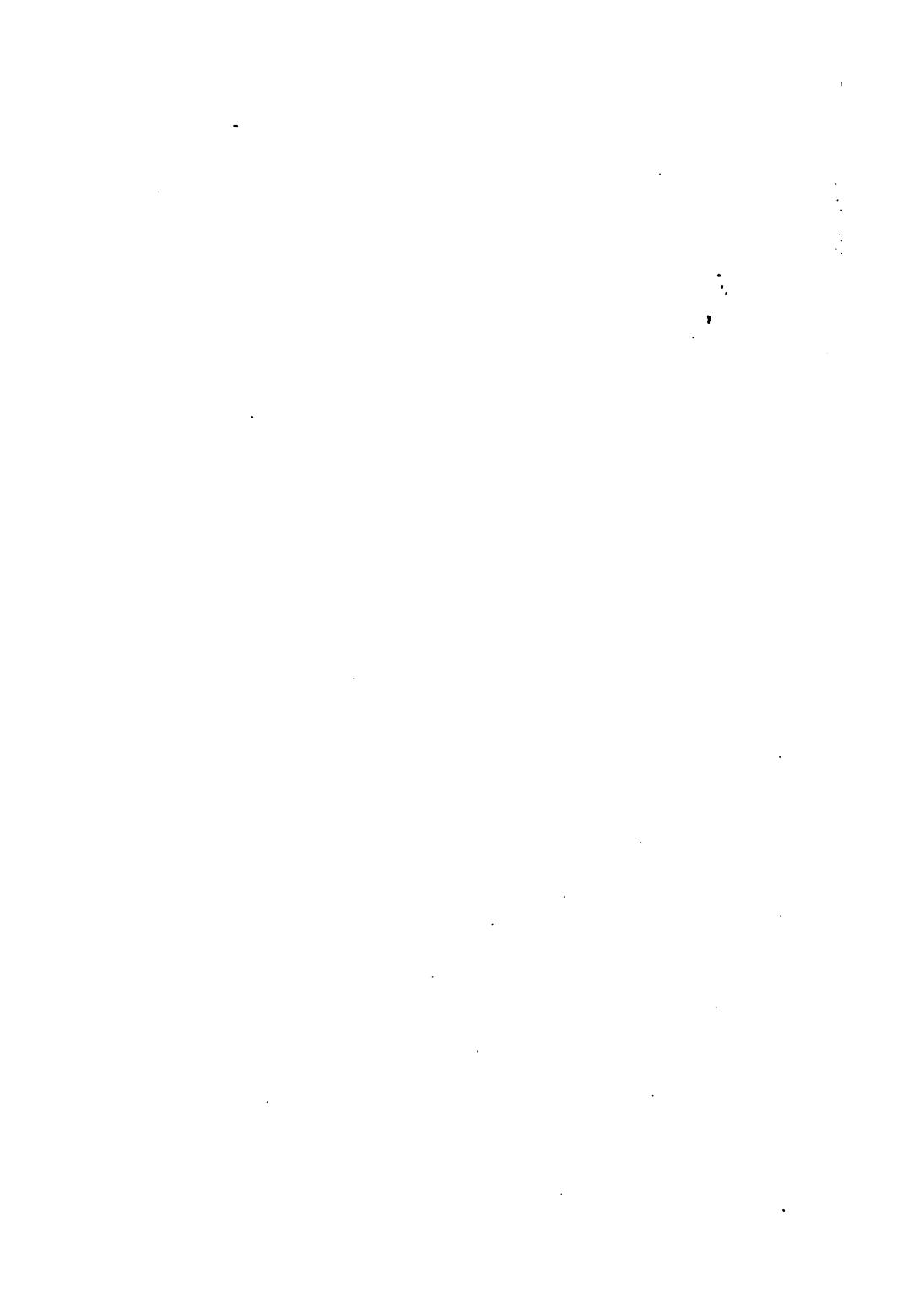
I can hear mother and Angela away in the spare room. They are debating as to whether Aunt Menelophe would prefer a feather bed to a mattress. The mattress isn't springy, so I have yelled "feather bed." Angela has called back that it is unladylike to shout. She seems to forget how often she has told me this.

The front gate has just banged, and through the oak trees and sycamores and across the lawn, shimmering in the afternoon sunshine, I can see Robert. He wears the old coat, and I am quite sure now that I like old coats. Now he has spied me at the open window. . . . I can almost feel his smile. Now he is calling to me. . . . And I must go to him.

THE END.

71





Stanford University Libraries



3 6105 022 369 347

STANFORD UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
CECIL H. GREEN LIBRARY
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305-6004
(415) 723-1493

All books may be recalled after 7 days

DATE DUE

